

# **BIGGLES**

## **AND THE BLACK MASK**



**Captain**  
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# CHAPTER 1

## BIGGLES REMEMBERS

BIGGLES sat at his desk in the Air Police office at Scotland Yard studying the periodical report on International Civil Aviation.

He had looked at one page for so long that Ginger, working at a filing cabinet, remarked: 'Isn't it about time you turned over the page? What's on your mind?'

'I'm thinking,' answered Biggles, pensively.

'About what?'

'I'm wondering if it's possible for a man with a crooked streak ever to straighten out.'

'And what conclusion have you reached?' inquired Air Police Sergeant Bertie Lissie.

'I'd say it may be possible while all goes well; but there will always be a weakness. The piece that has been straightened, under pressure, is liable to bend.'

'What induced this profound train of thought, if I may ask?'

'An item of news I've just read here.' Biggles sat back and lit a cigarette. 'I don't know if you've noticed it but since I've been on this job I've sorted out some problems which could have got a non-flying cop bogged down. I'm not flattering myself by implying I'm smarter than the next man. No. It happens that I've been in aviation a long while, and in that time I've seen all sorts of pilots, and aircraft, come and go. It's also my luck to have a memory. That can be reduced to one word. Experience. That, more than once, has enabled me to see the ground when the overcast looked solid.'

'You still haven't answered my question, old boy,' returned Bertie. 'Why this sudden burst of philosophy?'

'Last month a man named Roderick Canson was granted a licence to operate an air charter company.'

'Any reason why he shouldn't?'

'That is precisely what's exercising my mind. I knew Canson years ago as a flying officer RAF. At that time he had one of those crooked streaks I mentioned a moment ago. Naturally, I'm bound to wonder if he still has it. We all have our weaknesses, and I'm aware that I have mine. But I've never sunk to robbing my brother officers.'

'Did he?'

'He did. And, moreover, he got away with it. Don't ask me how. I could only conclude it was a glib tongue or the charm he could turn on. Anyhow, he got away, twice, with a reprimand. I must admit he was popular in the mess although he wasn't my cup of tea. He talked too big. Really big men don't talk big. He was also that rare thing, a good pilot who is also a clever

mechanic. He could do anything with his hands. It was an education to watch him at a bench. He was also the most plausible liar I've ever known. They say that to be a good liar you must believe your own lies. Canson told a tale so convincingly that I fancy he could do that. He was always hail-fellow-well-met, He spent money freely — as things turned out, not always his own. He was a queer mixture.'

'He must have been.'

'I believe his real trouble was vanity. I suppose you'd call him good-looking. He certainly fancied himself. But a man who has his hair artificially waved like a corrugated iron roof isn't my idea of a man. When I knew him he sported one of those fair, fluffed up moustaches. Nothing wrong with that. But he never stopped fiddling with it — like a girl who can't leave her hair alone. It may be significant that the lower ranks called him Foxy. Foxy Canson. And as you may have noticed, when troops coin a nickname for an officer it's generally on the beam.'

'What mischief did he get up to?'

'The first time he slipped up — as far as I know — was over a bag of coal.'

'Coal?'

'The stuff you put on the fire. Why coal, you may ask? Canson was married. A nice-looking girl. I sometimes wondered how she put up with him. They had permission to live off the station so they rented a cottage not far away. One day his batman, going out on his motorbike with a sack on the carrier, was stopped at the gate. The sergeant of the guard asked him what was in the bag. It turned out to be coal. From the Service dump, of course. The man said he was taking it to Canson's house. He, and Canson, were put under open arrest. At the court martial it was revealed that this pinching Service coal for Canson's private use had been going on for some time. The airman pleaded he had been ordered to do it and couldn't disobey an order. This, a reasonably valid defence, was accepted; and possibly because it would have been difficult to punish one without the other, Canson got off with a caution as to his future conduct. His popularity and charm may also have had something to do with it.'

'I wouldn't call that a very serious charge,' said Ginger.

'Maybe not, but it provides a line to his character. I may be a harsh critic, but I hold the view that if a man will steal a small thing, given the opportunity he will help himself to something bigger. To get an airman involved was to me unpardonable.'

'Absolutely,' murmured Bertie. 'Only a stinker would do that.'

Biggles went on. 'Canson's next effort had an even nastier smell. He was Mess Secretary. After a while some officers, including myself, began to look hard at their mess bills, particularly their wine accounts. I for one was sure I hadn't had the drinks for which I was charged. Naturally, there were complaints, and these eventually reached the ears of the Group Captain commanding the station. He called for the books and got the Accountant

Officer to audit them. Then the truth came out. Canson, if you please, had been having some of the wine, ordered for the mess, delivered at his house. The deficiency he had squared up by overcharging officers on their mess bills — a pound or two here, a pound or two there. He was, of course, put under close arrest. This time I was sure he'd be handed his bowler hat.'

'Don't say he got away with that,' said Bertie.

'Nearly. All he got was a severe reprimand, and as he could hardly remain on the station he was posted to Iraq. That was the last I heard of him.'

'Marvellous what some fellows can get away with,' murmured Ginger, cynically. 'How did he manage it?'

'Don't ask me. He put up some cock and bull story about intending to pay for the wine out of his winnings at cards in the mess. He was in fact a first-class bridge player. He had no money of his own. For all I know he may have gone straight after that; but now you'll understand why, when I saw he'd managed to get a licence to run an air operating company— well, it gave me something to think about.'

'Where is this?'

'He's taken over the abandoned American training aerodrome at Millham, in Suffolk.'

'Any other particulars?'

'Yes. He's started with two machines, an Auster Autocrat and a de Havilland Dove. What sort of business does he hope to do with a *Dove*, a twin-engined eight seater, with a pay load — if my memory serves me — of 1,500 lb. and a range of 700 miles? There's another angle to that. From where has he got the money to start a venture like this? You can't buy aeroplanes with chicken feed. When I knew him, although he talked as if he was a millionaire, Canson never had any money; he spent his pay as fast as he drew it. That, maybe, is what caused the trouble.'

'He may have got some rich uncle to put up the money,' suggested Bertie.

'It's possible. He was glib enough to talk Eskimos into buying refrigerators. Even so, how and from where does he hope to get enough passengers to fill a *Dove* to capacity? You can't pay your way, let alone make money, flying with empty seats.'

Ginger came in. 'What this boils down to is, you're suspicious.'

'I wouldn't go as far as that. It would be going too far. Let's say I'm a bit puzzled. I'm not questioning Canson's ability to run an air charter concern. He's a good pilot and he must know the regulations. He may have turned over a new leaf. Knowing what I do I may be prejudiced; but on his past record I'm bound to wonder if he's the right sort of man to be doing what he's taken on.'

'What you really mean is, there may be more to this than appears on the surface,' guessed Ginger.

'Put it that way if you like.'

'One thing in his favour is, he must have left the Service with a clean sheet or he wouldn't have got a licence. Surely someone would check up.'

‘I wouldn’t be too sure of that. I’ve already told you he had a way with him. In ten minutes he could make black look white; and on top of that he had a knack of making friends in high places.’

‘Well, what are you going to do about it — if anything?’

‘I feel like dropping in at Millham to have a close look at the sort of business Canson is doing. I mean, if he’s getting any customers. He can’t last long without any.’

‘Why bother?’ questioned Bertie. ‘Why not wait for him to make a boob. If he’s up to any funny business we shall know about it eventually,’

‘Perhaps. Perhaps not. He’s a clever fellow. And he has, or used to have, ambitious ideas. Anyhow, you know how it is. If he does get away with something there’ll be the usual outcry. What were the Air Police doing? Why didn’t they spot it? That would mean a rap on the knuckles for me. I’d rather satisfy my curiosity *now*, before anything happens. If everything is above board we can forget it. I know it isn’t very nice to go through life being suspicious of people but that’s why we’re here; and in this case Canson, with blots on his copybook to my certain knowledge, has only himself to blame. That’s what I tell some of these youngsters. One black mark can stick all your life.’

‘When are you thinking of going?’

Biggles glanced at the window. ‘It seems a fair sort of day; it might as well be now. I’ll take you with me. Two pairs of eyes are better than one. Ginger, you’d better finish that filing job. You might ring up the hangar and get the Auster pulled out ready.’

‘I’ll do that,’ said Ginger.

It was a little after eleven o’clock when the Air Police Auster arrived over Millham aerodrome, a pre-war rural airfield that had been abandoned because it was not large enough to take modern military jet aircraft. For a time, before being given up, it had been used as a practice emergency landing ground for pilots under training in piston-engined machines. There was still one permanent hangar, with the original tarmac apron in front of it, and a cluster of administration buildings. A wind-stocking on its pole and the usual white chalk circle indicated that the flat, treeless area was still a landing ground for aircraft. Two machines were standing on the tarmac. Three men, near them, were looking up at the new arrival.

‘Not exactly falling over themselves with activity,’ observed Bertie, casually, as they lost height.

There were no formalities. Biggles landed, ran on to the buildings, switched off, got out and with Bertie walked on to meet a man now coming towards them. ‘It’s Canson,’ he said in a low voice. ‘Leave the talking to me until we see how he shapes.’

For a moment Canson did not appear to recognize Biggles. A puzzled expression dawned on his face as he said: ‘Haven’t we met before,

somewhere?’

‘We have. Bigglesworth’s the name. Remember?’

‘Of course. How could I forget. What are you doing nowadays? I seem to remember someone telling me you’d got a flying job for the government — an inspector of some sort.’

‘Quite right. Meet one of my assistants — Bertie Lissie. He was with me when I had 666 Squadron.’

‘Had you any reason for inspecting my little show here?’ inquired Canson, with raised eyebrows and a faint smile.

‘No. Noticing your registration I dropped in to see if everything was all right.’

‘No trouble here, my good fellow. Everything goes according to plan — as they say.’

Biggles took a casual look round, his eyes resting for an instant on a Rolls parked in the shade of the hangar. ‘It must have cost you a pretty penny to set yourself up in this sort of business.’

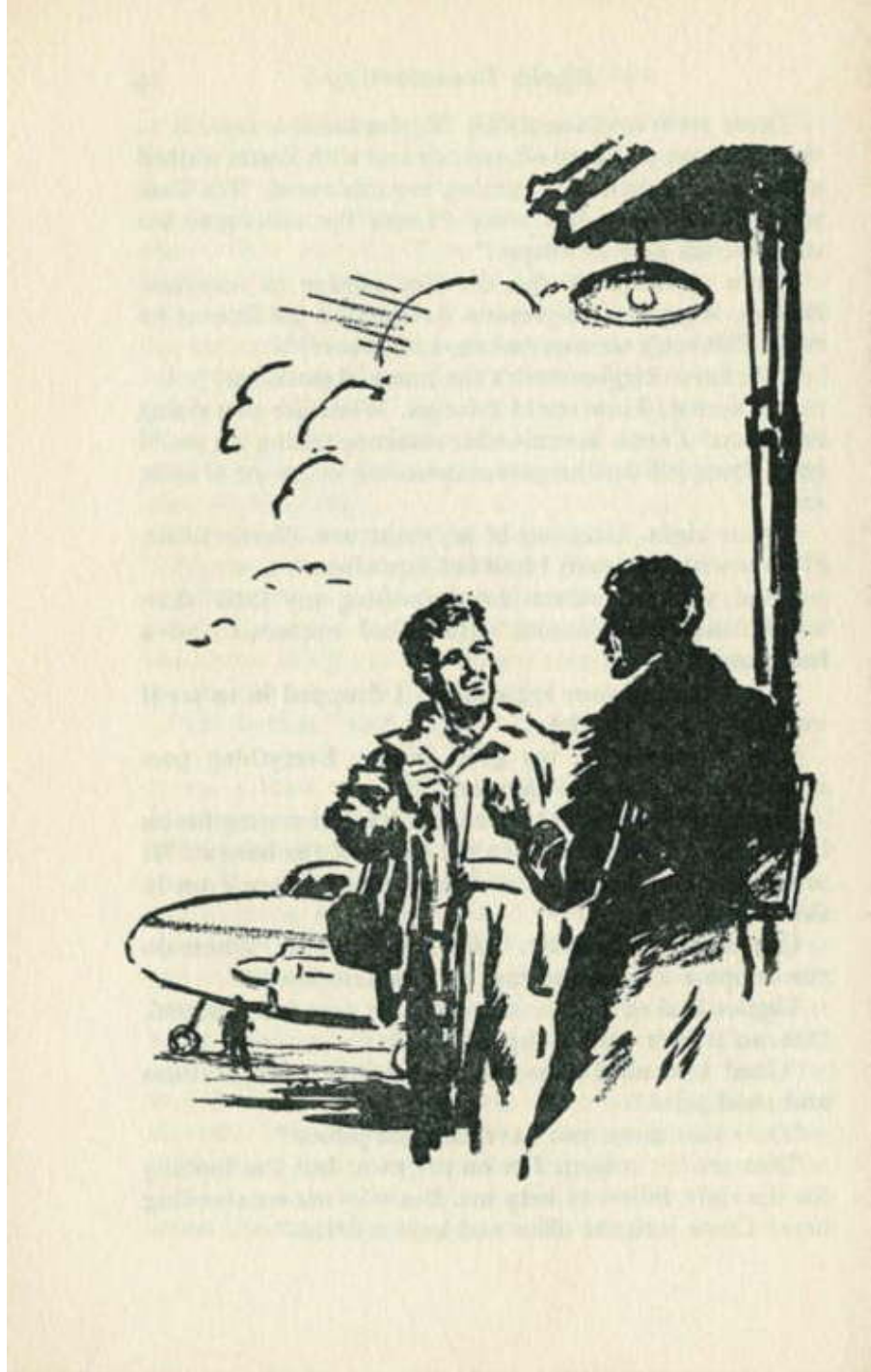
Canson smiled broadly. ‘Me? Don’t be silly. Where do you suppose I’d get the cash to buy aeroplanes?’

Biggles looked mildly surprised. It was not affected. ‘Oh, so it isn’t your company?’

‘Good Lord, no. I’m merely manager of air operations and chief pilot.’

‘Does that mean you have assistant pilots?’

‘Not yet. At present I’m on my own; but I’m looking for the right fellow to help me. But why are we standing here? Come into the office and have a drink.’



‘Thanks.’

They went in. Canson produced bottles and glasses from a cupboard.

‘You don’t appear to be very busy at the moment,’ prompted Biggles.



‘You’ve come on the wrong day, my dear chap. Had you come on a Monday you’d have seen a different picture.’

‘Why Monday?’

‘That’s the day we do business.’

‘Do you mean you can fill the Dove with passengers?’

‘Fill it! We’ve got a waiting list.’

‘How do you manage that?’

‘I can see you don’t understand the sort of business we’re running here. I’d better explain. Do sit down. This company is a subsidiary of a new travel agency called Sunnitours Ltd., head office in London. It was formed to cash in on the current tourist boom. More and more people are looking for cheap holidays on the Continent. We provide them.’

‘Where?’

‘We hope to expand, but at present we have only two regular runs, to Switzerland and the French Riviera. I have nothing to do with the bookings. All that’s done in London. One reason why we’re able to do really cheap holidays is because the company has its own hostels — you know the modern holiday camp sort of thing. We give all-in price for a week, although this can be extended. It’s all very simple. Bookings are made from Monday to Monday. At eight o’clock on Monday morning the tourist party assembles at the London office. After passports and so on have been checked a fast coach brings the party here. I fly them to their destination, where they are met by another coach which takes them to their quarters. I then fly home the previous week’s party. It runs like clockwork.’ Canson spoke enthusiastically and was obviously well satisfied with the success of the scheme.

‘Where does the Auster come in?’

‘For a possible emergency. That’s another part of our service. Should any member of a party fall sick, or have urgent reason for coming home, I fly out and collect him, or her, as the case may be. We specialize in family parties — mum, dad and the kids. By foolproof organization, and without the heavy overhead expenses of the regular services we can do a really cheap job. Of course, we don’t pretend to be one of these luxury affairs.’

‘I see that,’ said Biggles. ‘There’s one thing I’m not clear about. When you bring your customers home where do you land for Customs examination?’

‘Here. We’ve got that laid on.’

Again Biggles looked surprised. ‘Do you mean you have a Customs and Excise officer here?’

‘When required. Not a full-time officer. He’d have nothing to do most of the time. The day a party is due in we notify Customs and they send an officer along to meet the plane. Then he goes home. We have to pay for that, naturally, but it works out cheaper than using an airport, where we should have to pay landing fees and lay on another coach to take people home. A lot of headwork has gone into this. The only way a show like this can be made to pay is by cutting expenses to the bone, and that’s what we’ve done.’

‘I can see that,’ agreed Biggles.

‘We’re giving people the cheapest overseas holidays they’ve ever had. I handle the actual flying. The bookwork, inquiries, publicity and so on, is done in London. That’s not my line.’

‘What about ground staff?’

‘All I want here, apart from myself, is one competent fitter and a rigger who knows his job. I’ve been lucky enough to find just the chaps I needed.’

‘Very good,’ congratulated Biggles, ‘Whose bright idea was this?’

‘Mine. It struck me one day and I got down to working out the details. There were a few snags, mostly concerned with Air Traffic Regulations, but I got over them. When I was ready I took the scheme to Sunnitours and told them I could handle it. They jumped at it. Up to that time they were doing their tours by train, boat and motor coach.’

‘So the show looks like being a financial success?’

‘Can’t be otherwise.’

‘What happens if you have a crack-up? It can happen.’

‘That’s all covered by insurance, of course. Matter of fact that’s our heaviest expense.’

‘All very interesting,’ said Biggles, getting up and rubbing out his cigarette. ‘It shows what can be done by people with brains, imagination, and a flair for organization.’

‘That’s what I told Sunnitours. Now they can see it for themselves.’

‘Well, we’ll be getting along. Thanks for the drink and for showing us how things can be done. I hope the show keeps going well for you.’

‘No reason why it shouldn’t. I’ve got it all buttoned up.’

Still chatting they walked back to Biggles’ Auster. A last word or two and the machine was in the air, heading for home.

## CHAPTER 2

### SUSPICIONS

BIGGLES flew on. He did not speak. His expression was pensive, serious.

For some time Bertie did not break his train of thought; then he said: 'Well, old boy, what do you make of all that?'

'What can we make of it? Canson's story sounded reasonable — anyhow for the most part.'

'He seemed frank enough. He struck me as being a very decent fellow.'

'Of course he did. I warned you to be prepared for that. Good looks and charm always were part of his stock-in-trade.'

'He could look us straight in the face.'

'That, contrary to what you may have read, is nothing to go by. If all crooks looked crooked they'd be easier to catch.'

'I noticed you didn't tell him you were a cop.'

'I saw no reason to volunteer the information.'

'You didn't spot anything wrong?'

'Not exactly wrong, but one or two things struck me as odd. I was surprised by the Customs arrangement; but I think it must be true. Knowing it might be checked he'd hardly dare to invent such a lie, however good a liar he might be. I can't help feeling it's all *too* good, too easy, to be true. Put it like that. I suppose the company, as it's being run, could be made to show a profit; but Canson, on his own admission, is only an employee, and as such he wouldn't earn the sort of money he likes to talk about. That Rolls parked against the hangar must be his. Could he run a Rolls on the salary he's likely to get for the job he's doing — or says he's doing?'

'You think that's sufficient evidence for suspicion?'

'Hardly. There's another item that is. Now I'll tell you something you don't know. You saw those two men on the tarmac — Canson's ground staff?'

'Yes.'

'One of them is the airman who was involved in Canson's little coal racket. The other was acting clerk in the office of the Mess Secretary when he faked the wine accounts.'

'Oh here, I say. That's a bit of a coincidence.'

'If it is a coincidence.'

'You don't think—'

'Listen. Both those men knew, and had good reason to know, about the trouble Canson got in when he was in the Service. They gave evidence. One would have thought that Canson, knowing they knew the sort of man he was, would never want to see them again. Now then. Both men — whose names I forget — must have been in Canson's confidence when he was, in plain English, a thief. That makes all three of them crooks. Each man knows what

the other is. Now we find them together. Don't ask me to believe that's pure coincidence. If it isn't coincidence then Canson must have organized it. Why?'

'To have men by him he knew he could trust.'

'I'd say it goes farther than that. If Canson had something underhand in view it would be easier to use men whom he knew could be persuaded to go off the rails, than honest men who might jib.'

'I see what you mean.'

'I hope Canson's memory isn't as good as mine. Of course, when he recognized me he'd remember I was on the station when he got into trouble. The court martial and so on. But I don't think he made allowances for me spotting his two assistants as the men who were mixed up in the dirty work. It was a long time ago. I'd like to think Canson is now on the level; I wouldn't make trouble for him if he is. But I can't help feeling a bit uneasy. There's something about this business, several things in fact, that don't quite add up. If I knew nothing about Canson's record I wouldn't give the matter another thought; but knowing what I know I'm bound to wonder if there's a wasp in this innocent-looking pot of jam.'

'Then you don't intend to drop it?'

'I shall think about it and, if only to satisfy myself, make a few inquiries. I may have worked out what they will be by the time we get home.'

Nothing more was said, and an hour later they were back at Scotland Yard. Ginger was there. 'Well, how did you get on?' he questioned.

'Let's go to lunch. I'll tell you about it while we eat because I shall have a job for you presently and you'll need to have your clock set right.'

This was done, and back in the office Biggles explained his plan.

'First you. Ginger. Now you understand the position this is what I want you to do. Look up the address of this Sunnitours concern and go to see them. Find out the earliest date you can book for one of their air holidays; never mind where it is.'

'What if they haven't a seat in the near future?'

'Ask them to put your name on the waiting list. There may be a cancellation. Give them our home phone number so they can let you know.'

'And if there's a seat vacant now, or next week?'

'Take it.'

'You mean, I'm to go with the party?'

'Of course. All you have to do is keep your eyes open for anything unusual — that is, not strictly within regulations. See how the thing works. The reason I'm sending you is because Canson doesn't know you. If what he told us is true he'll be flying the Dove. Keep an eye on him. It would be no use me going because from the moment he saw me he'd be suspicious — if he has any reason to be suspicious.'

'This means I shall be away for a week.'

'Oh no. You're not having a week's holiday. Assuming I shall know your

address before you depart, the day after your arrival I shall send you a telegram, or get the Sunnitours office to send one, saying your brother Jack has met with a serious accident and you are to come home at once. You will tell the manager of the hostel. He will inform Canson who, if he lives up to his guarantee, will fly out in the Auster and fetch you. In this way we shall have covered the full service, so if there is anything, any irregularity, anywhere, you should be able to spot it.'

'I get the idea. What are you going to do?'

'Wait here for you, to see if you have anything of interest to report. In the meantime I shall do a bit of checking up on Canson's story. I want to know the names of the directors of this Sunnitours Company. At a pinch I could get that from the Board of Trade. I shall check at the Air Ministry when Canson left the Service, and why. Bertie can do similar checks, at the RAF Record Office, on the two ex-airmen Canson has working for him. It will also be necessary to find out from the head office if Canson really has this Customs arrangement, that he can get an officer laid on when he wants one. We've plenty to do here. If it all comes to nothing we shall have done nothing worse than waste a little time. My mind will be at rest as far as Canson is concerned.'

'Shall I start now?'

'You might as well. You're not likely to get a seat in a plane right away. That is if Canson told the truth when he said he was booked to capacity and had a waiting list. Of course, there's always a chance that he might run an extra tour to thin out the number of people waiting.'

Ginger made a suggestion. 'Instead of wasting time why shouldn't I follow the Dove on its next trip in one of our own machines? I could check its course and movements.'

'I want more than that. You could keep a closer watch on the Dove from the inside of the cabin, than from the outside.'

Ginger nodded. 'True enough. I'll see what I can make of it.' He went to the telephone directory for the address of Sunnitours Ltd and departed on his mission.

Biggles looked at Bertie. 'Right! Let's get on with what we have to do,'

Said Bertie: 'I understand you to say you weren't suspicious. All this sounds to me as if you were mighty suspicious.'

'All I'm trying to do at this juncture is satisfy myself that there's no reason to be suspicious.'

'Surely it would be easy enough to search the Dove next time it comes in from abroad.'

'It would, but if we found nothing we should have told Canson that we suspected him of running a crooked show. Let's clear up some of the details.' Biggles reached for the telephone.

By the time Ginger returned, two hours later. Biggles was in possession of most of the information he needed. Far from doing anything to justify his

suspicions it tended to ease them although there were one or two things that provided food for thought.

It was learned that Canson, a Flight Lieutenant at the end of his last overseas tour of duty, had retired from RAF at his own request, which as an officer he was course entitled to do. It was also learned that the two ailmen now in his employ had left the service at about the same time. The RAF Record Office had provided the information that their names were Tomlin and Rawlings. Both had secured their discharge on medical grounds.

There was an odd feature about this, Biggles thought, discussing the matter with Bertie. Tomlin had only recently been re-engaged to complete his time for pension. Why had he suddenly changed his mind? Was it another coincidence that both these men, now working for Canson, had left the Service at the same time?

In the matter of the Customs officer visiting Millham aerodrome Biggles was mildly surprised, because it was unusual, to learn that such an arrangement had been, made.

Then Ginger came in with his story. Everything had gone well. The Sunnitours offices appeared all they were said to be. It was evidently a going concern, several people being there making inquiries. He had been attended to by an efficient young woman who had explained how the service operated. There was no vacant seat for the time being, but should a single booking be cancelled he would have it. She would let him know. He had given her his telephone number. He had brought back with him some brochures giving particulars of the firm's activities. One of these gave the names of the directors of the company. They were Smith, Buchonnet and Kronfelt. Smith managed the London office. Buchonnet looked after the French terminus at Nice and Kronfelt the Swiss end at Geneva. From these airports private cars and coaches took the passengers to the hostels and, for an extra charge, to places of interest.

'It all looked fair, square and above board,' concluded Ginger.

'It could well be,' said Biggles. 'The company may be sound, but that doesn't rule out the possibility of Canson running a racket on his own account. Let's now forget that this air transport angle was his scheme. He put it up to Sunnitours and they, to use his own words, jumped at it. Anyhow, that seems to be all we can do for the moment. I'll have a word with Gaskin to see if these three men running Sunnitours have been in trouble at any time.'

'So after all this you're still suspicious,' challenged Bertie.

Biggles frowned. 'Yes,' he admitted. 'I can't shake out of my bones a feeling that there's something wrong somewhere.'

'A hunch?'

'Not entirely. I suppose it stems from my knowing what Canson used to be, and I'm still a believer in the saying, a leopard can't change his spots.'

'In other words, give a dog a bad name and hang him.'

'What else can you do with a bad dog? Let him run wild to bite somebody

else? Since you appear to be critical tell me this. Why should Canson give up a career in RAF, which carries security and a pension at the end of it, for the job he's doing now? He's the type who must have money, and plenty of it. He now owns a Rolls. How did he get it? Sunnitours has to work to a tight margin to show a profit, so I doubt if his salary can be as much as he was getting as a Flight Lieutenant in Service. Does that make sense?

Nobody answered.

Biggles went on. 'There's one other thing that puzzles me. Now I've had time to think, I wonder why Canson hasn't yet fixed up a second pilot. The cockpit of the Dove, as I remember it, has dual controls, with seats for pilot and co-pilot who can also act as radio operator. If he has a second pilot working with him, as he should, why did he duck the question when we were talking about staff? One would have expected his co-pilot to be at Millham when we were there. If he was he kept out of way. I can understand Canson trying to cut running costs, but — well, as I've said before, there's something about this set-up that doesn't ring as true as it should. However, there's nothing more we can do for the time being. I can't go back to Millham asking more questions without Canson realizing I'm suspicious about what he's doing there. Whatever else he may be he isn't a fool. There's nothing more to do here so we might as well knock off and go home. I've a few things to do there.'

Events moved faster than could have been anticipated, for they had not been long in the flat when the telephone rang. Biggles answered. He handed the receiver to Ginger with a brief 'For you.'

Ginger took the call. 'Yes, Mr Hebblethwaite here... That's splendid... Thank you... I'll be there. Pay in English money when I arrive... Passport. Yes, I understand that. Money... You can. Good. Where?... I see. Right, Good-bye.' Ginger, smiling, hung up.

'That's a drop of gravy,' he said, turning to the others. 'As you may have gathered, that was Sunnitours. Same girl I spoke to. She says they've got enough bookings to make up a load for tomorrow. Destination France. Land Nice airport. I have to be at the office at eight o'clock sharp, with my passport. I hope you've got some francs. I have some, but perhaps not enough to see me through.'

'I can fix that,' said Biggles. 'What did she say about money?'

'She said if I ran short of francs the car driver who meets the plane will let me have some in exchange for English notes.'

'That's illegal for a start, although it's a common wangle,' declared Biggles. 'Did she give you an address that will find you? I'm thinking of the telegram.'

'She told me the hostel was just behind Cap d'Antibes. Address, Bureau Sunnitours, *près* Cap d'Antibes, Alpes Maritimes.'

'Good enough,' said Biggles, 'You'd better get your things together. You won't be away long so you won't need much in the way of kit. By the time

you get back you should be able to answer some of our questions.’



# CHAPTER 3

## GINGER SETS OFF

THE following morning Ginger arrived at the offices of Sunnitours Ltd with a few minutes to spare. His only baggage was contained in a featherweight air-travel handbag and consisted of pyjamas, a clean shirt and his toilet things.

Against the kerb outside the office was an old Rolls-Royce that had been converted into a station wagon. He assumed, correctly as it turned out, that this was the transport that would take them to the aerodrome. The driver, in a flamboyant uniform, with the name of the company on the front of a peaked cap, stood waiting beside the vehicle.

Some of the passengers had already assembled. They were a couple with two children, a young woman, alone, and a lad in his late teens who, Ginger learned later, was a bank clerk going abroad for the first time. It also transpired they were all making their first trip by air: for which reason Ginger envied them their new experience. The first flight is always an occasion.

He announced himself at the counter, was given his ticket and paid for it. The ticket was actually a small folder of the 'all-in' type; that is, covering travel, food and accommodation for the period named. He had to show his passport, sign a form to the effect that he had nothing to declare in contravention of Customs, and that was that. Perfectly straightforward. The last two passengers, a young married couple, arrived a few minutes late. Their formalities completed everyone was given a neat packet of sandwiches to serve as lunch on the plane. The whole party then went out to the car. Luggage was stowed by the driver. Everyone got in, Ginger at his request being allowed to sit next to the driver, and they were on their way.

Once out of the traffic Ginger was soon in conversation with the driver, a cheerful cockney who talked about everything under the sun, from politics to football. Ginger learned nothing from him, his work consisting simply of taking passengers to and from the aerodrome.

On an open road the car arrived at Millham just after eleven o'clock, pulling up close to the tarmac on which stood a Dove aircraft with its twin engines idling. Two men, one in mechanic's overalls, stood by it. When everyone was out of the car another man, evidently Canson, came out of the office, walked to the machine and climbed into the cockpit. One of the other men now showed the travellers into their seats, four on each side of a central gangway. All were in good spirits, chatting and comparing notes as if they had known each other all their lives. During this period Ginger watched everything closely. He also took an interest in the aircraft, because he had never flown the type. With toilet and other conveniences it seemed to be ideal for the job it had to do. He had learned at the office that there would be no

intermediate stop.



He was now to learn the answer to one of Biggles' queries. Canson did not fly alone. The man who had shown the passengers into their seats now got in beside him so he was obviously going with them, either as co-pilot or radio operator, perhaps both. Who was he? Ginger wondered. As there was no one else about he thought he must be one of the two men Biggles had named as ground staff, Tomlin or Rawlings. Could it be that one of them now held a pilot's licence? It was possible, he decided.

The man remaining on the ground, the one in overalls, closed the door. He stood back, made a signal: the engines raised their voices and the aircraft moved forward. Conversation in the sound-proofed cabin died away as the passengers realized they were about to be airborne. They smiled at each other to hide any nervousness they may have felt. However, once in the air, they were soon talking again. The two children, unconcerned, began to unwrap their lunch sandwiches. They may have made an early start and it was now getting on for noon.

Of the flight to the South of France nothing need be said. It was a perfect summer day; under a flat blue sky visibility was excellent; the air was still, and once the machine had taken some altitude it was as steady as a barge on a river.

Ginger took a paperback novel from his pocket and settled down to read, looking out occasionally at the panorama spread out below, which he knew intimately, to satisfy himself that the aircraft was on course. He did not expect anything of interest to happen during this part of the programme, and nothing did. He had to suppress a smile at some of the remarks made by his companions when, over Southern France, the landscape changed and began to look 'foreign' — grey mountains, arid hills often with a castle or village perched on top.

Knowing the cruising speed of the aircraft he had already worked out the approximate time of arrival, and he was not far wrong. At four o'clock the Dove, presumably having received permission to land, touched down on the impressive new airport at Nice, its perimeter almost washed by the blue waters of the Mediterranean. He put his book away, for from now on he would have to use his eyes and probably his wits. His intention was to watch Canson, where he went and what he did, at all events as far as this was possible. He realized it would not be easy. He had given the matter a lot of thought. He had no idea of what Canson did on these occasions. If he went to the hostel, so well and good; but if he did not he could see no useful purpose in going there himself except perhaps to sleep. Would Canson and his co-pilot remain together or would they separate? If they parted he would obviously not be able to watch both.

Another question that worried him was this. Would there be members of a previous tour waiting to be taken home? As this was an extra trip he thought not, but he couldn't be sure, therefore it was difficult to make a plan. He didn't care about the people. He was not interested in them, feeling sure they would

be genuine holidaymakers. The problem really boiled down to this. If there were passengers waiting Canson would turn round and go straight home. He might do that in any case. If no one was waiting Canson would probably stay the night and return home the following day. If he stayed it would be difficult to keep in touch with him. Aside from this, as a civilian he would not be allowed the free run of the airport buildings, as would Canson, a professional pilot with an aircraft on the airfield. He would have to wait for him to leave and then follow him.

By the time the party had been passed through Customs, and had been met by a man in the Sunnitours uniform who guided them to a waiting coach, he had made up his mind what he would do. There appeared to be no one waiting to be taken home so the chances were in favour of Canson staying for a while, if not for the night. The two pilots had not emerged with the party. He didn't know where they were. He could only assume they had gone to check in. Anyway, he couldn't see them. He decided to stay and watch.

With this in mind he went to the coach driver, a Frenchman who spoke some English, and asked if it would be all right if he didn't go on the bus as he would like to have a look round Nice, and perhaps do some shopping, while he was there. He would provide his own transport to the hostel later. He knew it was no great distance to Antibes; a matter of twelve miles or so. In fact, he could see the Cape, at the western end of the bay, from where he stood.

To his relief the man, a jovial type, raised no difficulty about this. Indeed, he was most helpful, giving precise directions for finding the hostel. That was all Ginger needed to know. Not wishing to be cluttered up with his case he gave it to the man who put it in the coach with the rest of the luggage.

He waited for the coach to depart and then, free to do as he liked, took up a position behind a line of taxis from where he would be able to watch the main exit and at the same time keep an eye on the Dove in case it should take off. He could make no provision for that. The reason why he kept behind the taxis was because he did not want Canson to see him in case he recognized him as one of the tourist party; he might wonder why he had not gone in the coach to the hostel. Actually, Ginger did not think he would be recognized, because at Millham Canson had got into his seat with hardly a glance at the passengers. However, he was taking no risks that could be avoided.

He had a long wait. Planes came in and departed but Canson did not appear. What could he be doing? Having a meal in the restaurant? Drinking in the pilots' room? The Dove had not been moved. It was no longer possible for it to get back to England in daylight so it began to look as if it was there for the night. He had almost given up hope of seeing either of the two pilots in whom he was interested when they appeared together, carrying their travelling bags, which suggested they intended spending the night in Nice.

Somewhat to Ginger's alarm they walked straight towards him; but it turned out this was only to hire a taxi. They came so close that he heard the

order they gave to the driver. Ruhl Hotel. The door slammed and away they went. From force of habit he noted the registration. He took the next cab in the line and gave the same order. Now he knew where the two pilots were going there was no need for him to follow their car. He knew the famous Ruhl Hotel at the far end of the Promenade des Anglais. It was one of the largest in the town; also one of the most expensive. Obviously Canson intended to do himself well.

In spite of all this Ginger was by no means happy. He could see difficulties ahead. If the men he was following went into the hotel and remained indoors what could he do? It would be practically impossible to keep an eye on them. If they left the hotel later, and went different ways, it would only be possible to shadow one of them. That, he decided, would have to be Canson. He was a trifle disappointed that so far their behaviour had been perfectly normal.

His taxi reached the hotel just as the two men were going in. That meant there was no longer any urgency. He foresaw another wait, possibly a longer one. He paid his driver and found a seat on the broad terrace overlooking the promenade and the sea beyond, choosing one that commanded a view of the hotel exit. As usual the terrace was well patronized, some people, English from their conversation, having a late tea. He attracted the attention of a waiter and followed their example, prepared for anything, or nothing, to happen.

Darkness had fallen, although of course the promenade was a blaze of artificial light, when Canson and his companion came out. They wore hats so they were evidently going somewhere; but they were without their travelling bags, from which Ginger assumed they intended to stay the night at the hotel. At the step down from the terrace to the pavement they paused, and heard he Canson say: 'Don't change too much money at the Casino. See you later.' This struck Ginger as an odd remark to make. Had Canson said, don't *lose* too much money at the Casino, it would have been more easily understood.

'I'll watch it,' answered the other, and turning to the right walked away.

Apparently Canson had an afterthought, for called: 'Oh Rawlings. I should be back in about an hour so don't be late.'

Rawlings raised a hand to show he had heard.

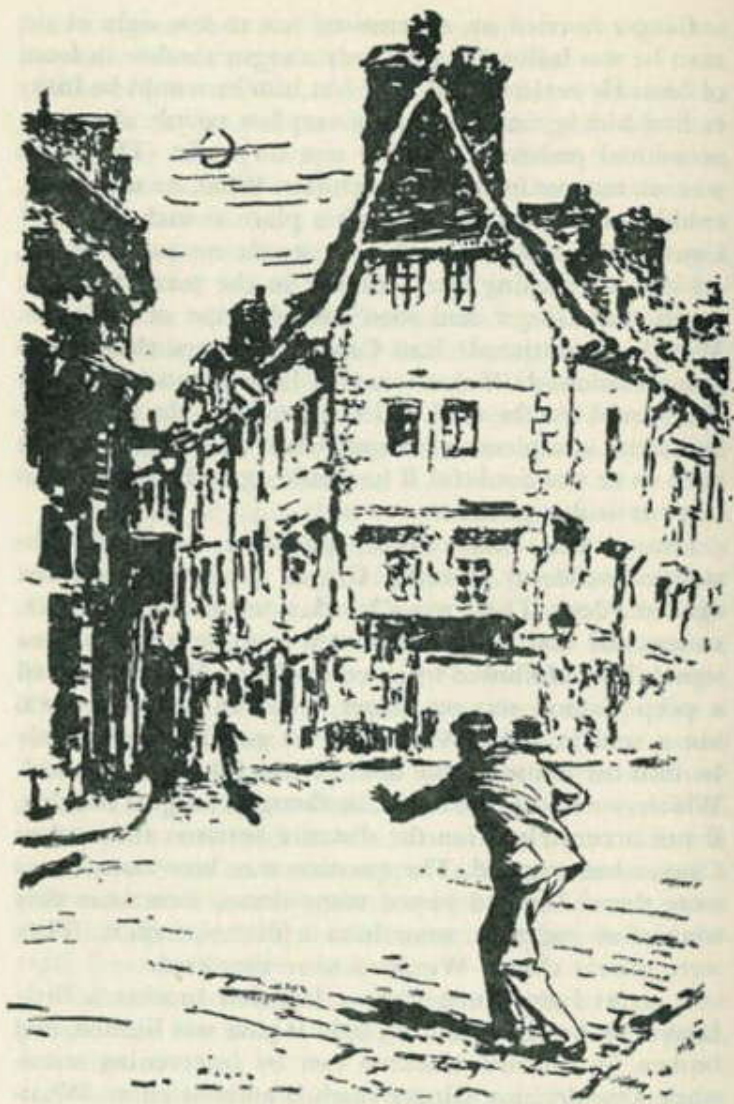
Canson turned to the left and went on.

Ginger got up and followed, having noted Canson's co-pilot was one of the men Biggles named as being employed at Millham airfield. He was not surprised. He had learned something. Apart from the name it was obvious the two men were on more intimate terms than their relative positions at the aerodrome would suggest.

At the point where the pavement turned left, on the opposite side of the road, at a corner of the garden named Jardin du Roi Albert, there is a permanent taxi rank, and for a moment Ginger thought Canson intended to hire one; but he walked straight past and into the gardens. With rows of palms and shrubs it was easy to keep in touch from a safe distance.

At the far end of the gardens, however, at the busy Place Messina with its streaming traffic and pedestrian crossings, it was not so easy, and he had to close up a little. His interest was mounting, for the general direction was away from the modern buildings, fashionable cafes and tourist attractions. Clearly, Canson was not out for pleasure. Was he making for the big new bus terminus?

It was soon revealed that he was hot, and Ginger became even more interested, although a little worried when his quarry turned into a narrow, badly lighted street, into the quarter that is known as the Old Town. And it is old, very old. It is visited often enough by curious tourists in daylight; but seldom by night. There was just enough light for Ginger to read the name of the street, or rather, alley. Ruelle François Leroux. In France it is a custom to name streets after persons; but as these are sometimes changed it can be confusing.



The origins of Nice, this part of Nice, are lost in the dim past. In its earliest days it was probably no more than a tiny fishing village. It became a Greek settlement. Long before the birth of Christ the Romans took it over. A castle

was built on a nearby hill for its protection, but all through the early Middle Ages it was taken, ravaged and sacked by invaders, raiders and pirates. It was besieged by the infamous Mediterranean corsair Barbarossa. Later it changed hands many times, being held by Turks, the kings of Sardinia, by French and Italian dukes and counts. In 1860 it became officially French. We are speaking of course of the Old Town, not the new modern city, one of the largest in France.

The result of more than two thousand years of strife and bloodshed is a labyrinth of ancient buildings, many of them dilapidated, huddled together for defence below what is left of the castle. The houses are tall and the streets narrow to provide shade in the heat of summer. There are holes and comers never reached by the sun. The place has the queer, cold, sour smell of age. To a visitor entering from the new town the atmosphere can be sinister. It has reason to be so, for even in the last war on dark nights knives flashed, and more than one Nazi sentry who ventured in was never seen again. Here a Resistance worker, or an escaped prisoner, could find a safe hideout. This atmosphere appears to affect the many cats that slink furtively round comers or glare down balefully from walls and windows.

Today, of course, the tourist has nothing to fear. The people who live in this strange little world may be poor but that is all.

This is a digression, but it is important that the reader should have a rough picture of the sort of place into which Canson's steps had taken him.

Ginger hurried on, determined not to lose sight of the man he was following, now only a vague shadow in front of him. He realized that if he lost him he would be lucky to find him again. There were very few people about; an occasional pedestrian. There was no traffic. The street was too narrow for wheeled vehicles. What, he wondered, could Canson be doing in such a place at such an hour? Canson obviously knew, for he strode on purposefully, taking one turning after another in the maze, with the result that Ginger had soon lost all sense of direction. Was this intentional? Had Canson perceived that he was being shadowed? If these tangled little streets had names they could not be read. All Ginger could do was try to memorize conspicuous features when they occurred, but even so he was doubtful if he would again be able to find any particular place.

Canson was about twenty paces in front when he stopped suddenly, causing Ginger to shrink back flat against a door. There was a knock, a sort of double knock, so unusual that Ginger suspected it to be a recognition signal. It was followed by an eerie silence. When he risked a peep Canson was no longer there. In fact, there was not a soul in sight. Where had he gone? It could only be into the house on the door of which he had knocked. Which one was it? He could, he thought, judge it roughly, if not accurately, from the distance between them when Canson had stopped. The question was, how many doors were there? He had passed many doors, sometimes they were close together, sometimes a distance apart. They were always closed.



Windows were shuttered.

A street lamp hung from a lopsided bracket a little farther on but the radius of light it gave was limited, and broken by uncouth shadows cast by intervening stonework. One decision Ginger reached without effort. Whatever Canson might be doing there it was not for any good and proper purpose.

He walked on, slowly, alert, step by step, until he reached the house which he thought Canson had entered. It turned out to be a tiny shop. A door was there, and beside it a sheet of plate glass. The interior was unlighted, but by putting his face close against the glass and peering in he could make out what appeared to be photographs, some on stands, some lying flat on a sheet of paper, others pinned to or stuck on a cardboard background. He came to the natural conclusion that it was a photographic establishment.

On the door post he discovered a small notice board, but he was unable to read the words on it; the paint had faded, the board was dirty and the light too dim. It was important that he should have the name of the establishment, perhaps the occupier, and any other information the board might offer. Dare he risk using his petrol lighter? It would provide enough light for his purpose.

He looked up and down the street. He had it to himself. The only sound was the deep growl of a tom cat against the confused murmur of the traffic on a main road not far away. He was feeling for his lighter when his eyes fell on something he had not previously noticed. A yard or so farther on what he had taken to be a shadow was a narrow, tunnel-like cavity; in fact, an arched entrance leading to — what? He couldn't see. The inside was as black as a coal hole. As he stared at it he thought he heard a slight movement. A cat? He peered forward, and held his breath when he made out, just inside, sitting hunched up on the ground, the vague form of a human being. A woman. Dressed in black. Had it not been for the pale outline of the face, which he could just distinguish, he would not have known there was anyone there.

Instinctively he drew back.

A voice spoke, a thin whining voice. Speaking of course in French it said: 'Spare a *sou* for a poor old woman, *monsieur*.'

## CHAPTER 4

### WHAT HAPPENED IN NICE

GINGER breathed again. It was only a beggar. Feeling in his pocket he took out a few coins, and without looking at them, for they could be of no great value, dropped them into the skinny hand that had been held out. '*Voilà, madame.*'

'*Merci bien, merci, monsieur.*'

Ginger would now have walked on, to return later, but the old woman said: 'Can I help you, *monsieur*? You look for someone perhaps.'

Feeling that he should give an excuse for stopping Ginger answered, choosing a name at random: 'I was looking for the house of Doctor Cauvet.'

'He does not live here, *monsieur*. I do not know this name.'

'Thank you, *madame*. I must be in the wrong street.'

Ginger walked on until he came to a side turning and then stopped to think. The old woman was a nuisance. Why had she chosen such a place to squat? There was no likelihood of rain so the question of shelter did not arise. Could there be another purpose? Was she playing the part of a watch dog? It was, he thought, just possible, but hardly likely. He had an idea she would not have spoken had he not become aware of her presence.

This thought led to another. He remembered he had had in his trousers pocket, apart from some French francs which had been given to him as change at the hotel, some English silver; a florin and a shilling among others. Taking from his pocket the coins that remained he examined them. The florin was not there. He could only have given it to the old woman. What would she think of that? Perhaps it didn't matter. It was a mistake — a careless one — easily made. It could only tell her he was an Englishman.

How long would she remain there? He was still anxious to read the plate on the door so that he would have no difficulty in finding the house Canson had entered, should Biggles decide to look at it; but this would necessitate a light, and he hesitated to use one while the old crone was there. After being told his imaginary doctor did not live there what excuse could he find for that? She would wonder what he was doing. She might tell the occupier, whom she probably knew, of his suspicious behaviour. She might fetch the police.

Happening to look up he could just read, in the light of the next lamp, the name of the street. Rue Baldini. That was something worth knowing, anyway, he told himself.

He waited for a quarter of an hour and then strolled back towards the archway hoping that now the old woman had some money she had gone off to spend it. He was relieved to find she had. At all events she was no longer where he had left her. Good! Now he could get what he wanted. He was feeling for his lighter when a sudden noise, the rattle of a chain and the

turning of a key, caused him to turn about and walk smartly away. Ten steps and he turned again, flattening himself against a wall, to watch.

He saw Canson come out and walk quickly up the street. He recognized him by his figure. He now carried an object that looked like a bulky portfolio. He had arrived without luggage of any sort so this obviously had been collected at the house. What was it? What did it contain? were questions that automatically flashed through Ginger's brain. The odd thing was, in his concern about the old woman he had forgotten all about Canson.

The door had been closed, so again he approached, impatient at having so much trouble over such a simple task. For the third time he felt for his lighter.

Then it happened.

A woman's voice said shrilly: 'This is the man!'

Instantly, without further warning, there was a rush and two men were on him. Behind them the old woman in black hovered like a witch.

Ginger struggled desperately, but taken completely by surprise he was at a disadvantage from the start. It had happened in a flash. One of the men had got behind him and was pinning his arms to his sides so that he could not actually fight. The other man came from the front with an arm raised. The hand held a dagger. As he came in and struck Ginger raised a leg and drove his foot into the man's stomach. With a gasp the man staggered back. The dagger clattered on the pavement. The woman swooped on it.

For some reason — Ginger discovered it later — the man behind him spat out a curse and released one arm. This gave Ginger a chance. He could half turn. Using his free arm as the man struck at his face he caught the blow, carried the hand to his face and sank his teeth into the thumb. This is not a very nice trick, but in a close struggle it can be effective because the pain caused is considerable and the victim thinks more of getting free than pressing home his attack.

It worked. The man let out a cry and released him. Ginger sprang clear and raced away up the street. He took the first turning, the next and the next. He had no idea of where he was going but that didn't worry him. All he wanted was to get well away from his assailants. A glance behind showed he was not being pursued so he steadied his pace to a fast walk, heading for a noise of traffic not far distant. Three minutes later he was in the bright lights of a broad street with the sea on the far side. He now knew where he was. This was the Quai des États Unis, which might be called an extension of the Promenade des Anglais, so he was not far from the hotel where he had started.

Turning to the right he hurried on and did not stop until he came to the gardens through which he had walked earlier. Finding a vacant bench in the shadow of a palm he sank down on it, mopping his face with his handkerchief, to recover his composure. He was streaming with sweat, for the night was hot and humid. He was still breathing heavily and his hands were trembling from shock. Utterly unprepared for such a murderous attack it had been severe. Such a possibility had not for a moment entered his mind.

It was some minutes before he could think clearly.

He examined himself. He appeared to have suffered no injury, but he discovered a four-inch gash in the upper part of his left sleeve and for the first time realized how narrowly the dagger had missed him. The spot was wet. He pinched it and looked at his fingers. Blood. He was not conscious of any wound, and confirmed it. Then he understood; understood why the man behind him had released his hold. The dagger, deflected when he had kicked the man in front, had run across the fingers of the man holding the arm. No wonder he had cursed and let go!

What amazed Ginger as much as anything was the violence of the attack. It had been a deliberate attempt at murder. There was no doubt about that. He recalled the stories he had heard of how during the war the corpses of victims of the French Resistance had been disposed of by being thrown down old wells known only to them. But why had they been so determined to kill him? They must have been sure he was a spy. How did they know? What had he done? It was the old woman who had given him away. Was it because of the English money he had given her when Canson had been inside? That was careless of him.

Summing up he came to the conclusion that the woman was a sentry, posted in the archway to keep watch for strangers who lurked in the vicinity. She may have seen him stop when Canson had stopped to knock and from this guessed the truth; that he was shadowing Canson. Be that as it may, he thought; that such precautions were being taken could only mean that something ugly was going on in the shop in the Rue Baldini. Canson had been there. He had arrived without luggage and departed with a case. What was in the case? Where was Canson taking it? This would be something for Biggles to work out when he was told the news. At least he had some information to take home.

He still had problems. He didn't know what was written on the plate on the door of the shop, but decided it would be folly to go back again so soon. That would have to wait. He would have to go to the Sunnitours hostel for the night; for two reasons. If he failed to show up he might be reported missing and that could bring in the police. He didn't want that to happen, anyhow, at this stage of affairs. If they found him it would mean awkward questions. If they failed to find him it would soon be generally known that an English member of the Sunnitours party had disappeared.

He would be known by name. That could lead to more complications. The people in the Rue Baldini might put two and two together. So might Canson. The second thing was, he felt he ought to be at the hostel when Biggles' telegram arrived. He wanted to go home anyhow, and the best way would be to follow Biggles' instructions and allow Sunnitours to take him back to England.

There was a snag about that. Canson was still in Nice. Unless the Sunnitours office in London had some means of getting a message through to

Canson in Nice how could Canson fly him home?

Ginger gave it up. Things were getting too difficult. They would have to take care of themselves. Sitting on a bench in the gardens, guessing, would not solve his problems. He got up, walked to the corner where the taxis were parked, and took the first in the line. When he told the driver he wanted to go to Antibes there was some hesitation, but the promise of an extra pound on the official fare did the trick. He was still a little perturbed about what might happen at the hostel.

Thanks to the instructions the Sunnitours driver had given him he had no difficulty in finding the place. Having paid off his cab he went into the main building, set between a row of small but neat bungalows, to be greeted by the driver, now wearing a white apron, and his wife, who between them ran the place, as he learned later. The woman, a buxom, cheerful-looking woman, delighted to learn he spoke French, said they were just getting worried about him. The evening meal was finished and cleared away, but no matter, she would make him an omelette, if that, with cheese and fruit would be enough. Ginger said that would be ample, he hadn't much appetite — which was true. He had had a nasty shake-up, and had not yet fully recovered.

He was told the other members of the party had gone for a walk as far as the sea. He said he would not be going out again and handed in his passport, as is customary, for the police check.

Having had his meal he was shown his room, which turned out to be number five. It was little more than a cubicle but it was fitted with hot and cold water. The walls were thin, being in fact merely plain grey asbestos sheeting, but the furniture, consisting of a bed, a table and a chair, if simple was sufficient. The hostel had obviously been carefully planned at a considerable outlay, and he found it difficult to associate this with what had happened in Nice.

Where did Canson fit in? Up to his arrival in Nice Ginger had assumed, admittedly without justification, that the whole set-up was crooked. He now began to think on different lines. Was the Sunnitours organization a genuine concern in which Canson was running a racket on his own account? Some illegal business which his employers knew nothing about? The caretaker and his wife seemed to be nice, ordinary, honest people.

The affair in the Rue Baldini left no doubt in his mind that Canson was up to something. Why, otherwise, would he associate with potential murderers? It had been too dark for him to see his attackers so he did not think he would recognize them again should he see them. By the same token they would not recognize him. He was not so sure about the old woman. Canson had already left the shop so he couldn't have seen him. Of the man who had seized him from behind he had seen nothing at all. Of the man with the knife, who had been in front, he had only a blurred impression of a thin black moustache on a youngish face under a beret.

Ginger found his bag on the floor. He threw his pyjamas on the bed, got out

his toilet kit and had a good wash, after which he felt better. He then sponged the blood out of the sleeve of his jacket and hung it up to dry. There was nothing he could do about the slit in the cloth, anyhow for the time being. In the morning he might find a tailor in the town willing to repair it. The thought occurred to him to put a call through to Biggles to tell him what had happened. But it would be dangerous to use the hostel phone, even if there was one, and as he did not feel like going into the town to look for a public call box he decided against it. He would be seeing Biggles shortly and there was no immediate urgency. It was getting late, anyway.

He was content to get into bed, for he had had a tiring day. He heard his travelling companions arrive home, making a good deal of noise, but he pulled the sheet over his ears and was soon asleep.

## CHAPTER 5

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

CONSIDERING how his nerves had been rattled by shock Ginger had a good night, but he was awakened rather early by brilliant sunshine pouring through his window. Finding the bathroom at the end of the corridor he had a shower, and feeling refreshed was ready for anything. In the broad light of day he found what had happened in Nice overnight hard to believe. It seemed more like a bad dream.

He went along to the dining-room to find he was the first up of the tourist party. However, he did not have to wait. The coach driver, who with his wife were evidently the caretakers, served him with the usual continental breakfast of coffee, hot rolls, butter and jam. He took the opportunity of asking the man if the pilots of the plane ever came to the hostel. He was told they never came. They stayed near the airport. He would have liked to ask more questions but thought it prudent not to appear too inquisitive. He was anxious to know if the Dove was still on the aerodrome, but he himself would soon be able to check that.

The man, bringing in some toast, noticed the tear in his sleeve. Ginger told him casually that he must have caught it on something, which was near enough to the truth; whereupon the man said he would get his wife to mend it for him right away. The wet patch had dried during the night, so Ginger thanked him, took the things out of the pockets and handed the jacket to him.

By the time he had finished his breakfast it was turned to him with madame's apologies that she had not made a better job of it. He sent renewed thanks. As matter of detail he could hardly see where the cut been. Most French housewives are clever with their needles.

By this time the rest of the party had trickled in and were being served with their breakfasts. Ginger stay speaking with them for a few minutes in order not appear unfriendly; but as soon as he could convenient do so he made his way to the town and in the main thoroughfare soon found what he was looking for — a garage. There was no difficulty about hiring a car to go to Nice airport and straight back. He was soon on his way, travelling at a speed faster than he would have wished, although he was in a hurry to return in case the expected telegram from Biggles arrived. It was eleven o'clock when the car came in sight of the aerodrome. A glance told him all he needed to know. The Dove was still there, in the same place.

So Canson hadn't gone home. This rather surprised him. What reason, he wondered, had the pilots for remaining in Nice?

He returned forthwith to Antibes and got the driver to drop him off as near as possible to the hostel. Another car was already standing on the rough gravel drive. A frown creased his forehead as he observed from the registration that

it was the car Canson had taken when he had left the airport to go into Nice; but before he could consider what this might imply he saw Canson, alone, come out of the hostel. This startled him. So the car was not a coincidence. What was Canson doing there? The caretaker had said he never visited the hostel.

As Ginger walked past the car he glanced in it. The driver was in his seat smoking a cigarette, and Ginger had a twinge of alarm when he saw a young man, with wisp of black moustache, wearing a black beret. Was this the man...? but Ginger comforted himself with the thought that the description would fit a million Frenchmen. He went on to where, looking anything but amiable, Canson stood waiting for him; in fact, staring at him harder than was polite. Why stare? What was he looking at?

Canson greeted him curtly with the words: 'Where have you been?'

Ginger's eyes opened wide. 'To Nice. Why? Is something wrong?'

'You've kept me hanging about—'

'I've kept you?'

'Yes. I've had a message from London, a phone call. Your brother is seriously ill and you're to go home at once.'

'That's too bad. What stinking luck.' Ginger was thinking, so instead of sending a telegram Biggles had got in touch through the Sunnitours office.

'Naturally, I came to see if you would decide to go home, in which case I'd fly you.'

'Thanks. I'm sorry. But how was I to know—'

'Why did you rush off to Nice so early?'

'To have a look round.'

'The caretaker here tells me you were in Nice last night.'

'That's right.'

'Did you get involved in some sort of accident?'

'No. Why?'

'Madame here tells me you ripped your sleeve. She mended it for you.'

Ginger's uneasiness was rapidly becoming alarm. Why this interrogation? 'Yes,' he said. 'It was most kind of her.'

'You should be more careful. Remember, we're responsible for you while you're here.'

'I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself,' retorted Ginger.

'What were you doing in Nice, anyway?'

'Having a look round. Exploring if you like. It's a civilized city, isn't it?'

'I suppose so. But let's not waste any more of my time. I'm due back. Do you want to go home?'

'I suppose I shall have to.'

'All right. You can come with me. Get your baggage. To save time I've got your passport. The police were here checking when I arrived. Here it is. Take it, and keep it handy. We don't want a hold-up at the airport.'

'Thanks. I'll just get my things. Shan't keep you more than a couple of



minutes.'

Ginger walked quickly to his room with his brain racing. Had he made a slip somewhere? What was the purpose of this questioning? Clearly, Canson was suspicious. How suspicious? Of what? Why? He remembered the driver of Canson's car. Was it the man who had tried to knife him in Nice? It was an uncomfortable thought. Canson obviously intended to use the car to take them both to the airport. At least, that was the declared intention. But once he was in the car where would it take him? So ran Ginger's thoughts, wildly, as he flung his things in his bag. If anything happened to him, should he fail to return home, Biggles would soon be looking for him. One of the places he would check was here, the hostel. Could he leave a message — in case?

There was no question of writing a letter. He daren't leave it here. He wouldn't have a chance to post it. There was no time for that, anyway. Canson, already impatient, was waiting. He would wonder what he was doing.

Ginger, thinking desperately could see only one way he might get a message to Biggles should he come to the hostel and look over his room. It was a slim chance but it was better than no chance at all. He could write on the wall. Somewhere inconspicuous, where the woman cleaning would not notice it. To write it in clear English might do more harm than good should the caretaker or his wife notice it. He could write it in code, using one of the simple rough and ready methods Biggles had sometimes used in an emergency. Put the first letter of a word last and add any two letters. To decode, delete the last two letters and then put the last letter first.

Ginger whipped out his pencil, and choosing a spot on the wall where the shadow of the window curtain fell, wrote swiftly:

HOTOSPAN HOPSEL UERIX ALDINIBEL ICENOR

INGERGUM

He was thinking, of course, that should Canson not go to the airport he would be taken to the scene of his overnight adventure.

This done he snatched up his bag and went out, 'Okay,' he said briskly. 'I'm ready.'

'Is that all the luggage you've got?' asked Canson, looking with surprise at Ginger's bag.

'It's enough for a warm climate,' returned Ginger.

They got in the car. It turned and set off, heading for Nice, Ginger wondering if he had been wise to accept Canson's invitation. But he felt in duty bound to follow Biggles' orders and return home as arranged.

As they sped along the coast road with the blue sea on their right thoughts continued to race through his head. If Canson was not actually suspicious he was behaving in a very odd manner. The man in the driving seat: was he really the man with the knife? If he was, had he been brought along to identify him as the spy in the Rue Baldini? What had put Canson on the track? Where had he slipped up? Had he in giving the old woman money made a bigger blunder than he had supposed? It would suggest he had not been long in

France or he would have put the English coins away to prevent confusion.

Canson broke into his thoughts. 'I see from your passport you're a student.'

'Yes.' This was the occupation shown in Ginger's civil passport. Why, Ginger wondered, had Canson troubled to read his passport? He must have seen his address, Biggles' flat in Mayfair.

This was quickly confirmed.

'I see you live in Mount Street,' remarked Canson, his eyes on the road ahead.

'Yes.'

'Expensive area.'

'What about it?' inquired Ginger coldly, feeling that Canson was getting too personal.

'Oh, nothing. I just thought that if you can afford to live in exclusive quarters you could afford a holiday on the same lines, instead of the cheapest on the market.'

'Have you any objection?'

'Of course not. Don't be so touchy. I was only making conversation.'

Nothing more was said, which suited Ginger, who wanted to think.

He was a little surprised, and it must be admitted more than somewhat relieved, when the car turned into the airport. That could only mean they were really going home. The car was dismissed and they walked on. Ginger wondering why Canson carried no baggage. Had he brought his bag in earlier? He was thinking particularly of the bag he had carried away from the photographic shop in the Rue Baldini.

He noted that Canson seemed to be well known to the airport officials most of whom gave him a nod or word of greeting. For that reason perhaps Ginger was only given a cursory glance in the Customs office. He was not asked to open his bag. He showed his passport and they proceeded to the aircraft. It was all easy and casual.

Just as they reached the Dove Rawlings got down from the cabin. It struck Ginger that he did this hurriedly, as if unprepared for their arrival. He had a screwdriver in his hand, and it seemed to Ginger, who in his nervous state was keyed up to be suspicious of anything, that he tried to prevent the tool from being seen, holding it straight down by the side of his leg. No comment was made about this. Canson merely said: 'Everything ready?'

'All set,' answered Rawlings.

Canson turned to Ginger, saying: 'Get in. You'll have the cabin to yourself.' He smiled bleakly, 'You're getting VIP treatment.'

'Sorry to cause you so much trouble,' returned Ginger.

'No trouble at all. I was going home anyway.'

Ginger got in, taking his bag with him, and dropped into a seat.

During the next few minutes, while final preparations were made for departure, his eyes were busy. He could see no other luggage so he assumed

Canson and Rawlings had put their stuff in the luggage compartment, which, after all, was natural enough. He was still puzzled about Rawlings' screwdriver. What could he have been doing in the cabin with such a tool? Screws may have needed tightening; but where were they? He couldn't see any.

The engines had been started. Both Canson and Rawlings were in the cockpit. The machine taxied slowly to a runway. There was a brief delay, apparently while they waited for permission to take off, then they were away, with the sparkling Mediterranean on their left and the gaunt grey peaks of the Alpes Maritimes to their right. Airborne, the Dove turned slowly north.

Now that he had plenty of time Ginger settled down to do some serious thinking, to sort out, he hoped, his doubts and suspicions, and to try to make sense of the events that had occurred during his brief stay on the French Riviera.

He was concerned, and perhaps a little worried, by Canson's questioning, but he was not alarmed for his personal safety. He would have been had he been taken to the Rue Baldini, or anywhere else in the Old Quarter of Nice. But he was now in a British aircraft bound for England, and even though Canson might be engaged in an illegal practice he could not imagine him resorting to physical violence even were he given the opportunity, which in the circumstances seemed unlikely. He assumed they would land at Millham.

Perhaps because he was anxious to see Biggles and make his report the flight seemed a long one, and it was with satisfaction that from an altitude of about six thousand feet he saw the grey waters of the English Channel creep up over the horizon. The white cliffs of Dover, one of the best known landmarks in the world, enabled him to make a rough guess at the course the aircraft was taking, and although Canson was keeping well to the east he saw no reason to change his opinion about their objective.

They were opposite the Thames estuary and beginning slowly to lose height when the door opened and Canson came into the cabin, evidently leaving Rawlings in control. Taking the seat next to Ginger on the opposite side of the gangway he looked at him with a peculiar expression.

'Everything all right?' he inquired.

'No complaints,' answered Ginger, wondering what was coming next.

'To save any argument when we're on the ground I want you to tell me something while we can talk here in private,' went on Canson.

'What do you want to know?'

'Last night, in Nice, you went into the Old Town.'

'Correct.'

'What took you there?'

'Call it curiosity.'

'Why did you go to the Rue Baldini?'

'Did I?'

'You did.'

‘In that slum, to me one street was like another,’ parried Ginger.

‘If I say you went to the Rue Baldini you wouldn’t deny it?’

‘No. So what?’

‘You gave an old woman some money?’

‘Okay. So I gave an old woman some money. What about it? It was my own money.’

‘I want to know why you went there.’

‘Why do you want to know?’

‘Don’t quibble. I’m asking the questions. What were you looking for?’

‘Just a minute,’ protested Ginger. ‘I can go where I like. What are you getting at?’

Canson’s voice took on a harder note. ‘Answer my question.’

‘Why should I?’

‘Because I say so.’

‘And who do you think you are to question where I go and what I do?’

What makes you so certain that I was in the Rue Baldini, anyhow?’

‘This,’ replied Canson softly. Reaching out he took the lower part of Ginger’s right hand sleeve and turned it over to show the cuff buttons. There should have been three. There were only two. Opening his left hand Canson very deliberately put a button on the spot where the missing one had been torn off. It matched — exactly.

Ginger realized of course what had happened. The button had been pulled off in the struggle, when his arms had been held. One of his assailants had found it.

‘Is that your button?’ asked Canson coldly.

‘It looks like it.’

‘You know damn well it is.’

‘Very well. So it’s my button. What about it?’

‘That,’ replied Canson succinctly, ‘is what I’m asking you. And you’d be well advised to give me the answer. Now, what were you doing in the Rue Baldini?’

‘I’ll give you two guesses.’

Canson got up. ‘Okay, if that’s how you feel. We shall be landing in about ten minutes. That’ll give you time to think things over. Some friends of mine will be meeting us. You may find them less patient than me.’

He went back to the cockpit.

## CHAPTER 6

### MR X

THE arrival of the Dove over its base at Millham found Ginger looking at the ground with considerable interest. The plane had come straight in without landing at a Customs airport for inspection. This could only mean, or should mean, that an officer would be here to carry out the check — that is, if Canson's story of how his machines operated was true. Seeing no preparations Ginger began to wonder. It seemed preposterous to call in an officer for one passenger. Yet he found it hard to believe that Canson would dare risk losing his licence by flagrantly breaking regulations. If he did that it meant he was seriously concerned about something.

The fact of the matter was, after Canson's threatening behaviour he had been relying on Customs officials to get him out of trouble. Now it looked as if there would be no inspection. Canson had said friends would be there to meet them. As they glided in he could see only one man, presumably Tomlin, the other mechanic, as he wore overalls.

Ginger was uneasy, but not seriously worried. He was now convinced that Canson was engaged in a big-money racket, but he could not believe that he would go so far as to murder him. Yet what else could he do to silence him? It would, he thought, be interesting to see what happened next. Come what may he was determined to see the business through, although he would of course have preferred to make his report to Biggles and leave the next move to him.

The afternoon was well advanced when the Dove touched down and without stopping taxied straight on into the hangar, a procedure for which Ginger was unprepared, so unusual was it. Before he had time to realize what this might imply the door had been opened and Canson stood there, a pocket-sized automatic in his hand. Using it to wave him down Canson said in a brittle voice: 'All right. Come on out.'

Ginger could only comply. There was no point in remaining in the aircraft, anyway. But he felt obliged to register a protest, as the natural thing to do. 'What's the big idea?' he demanded, in a voice high with indignation.

'You'll see,' answered Canson curtly.

'You'll be sorry for this,' promised Ginger. 'I'll report you—'

'Don't argue.'

Ginger jumped down.

Instantly he was seized by two men who, although he hadn't seen them, must have been waiting in the hangar. He did not resist, knowing it to be futile. With the mechanic there were four of them, including Canson, who kept him covered at short range with his automatic. The mechanic, approaching from behind, put a scarf, or a bag, over his head, blindfolding him.



‘Walk,’ ordered Canson,  
Ginger, guided by a man on either side holding an arm, walked, his chief

reaction to this treatment being astonishment that Canson should go to such lengths. He did not have to walk far. He was bundled into a car, still with a man on each side. The doors slammed. It moved off.

He made only one remark during the drive that followed. Speaking calmly he said: 'Would you mind telling me what this is about? Who do you think I am?'

The answer he got was: 'You'll find out.' He did not know the voice, so he did not know if Canson was in the car.

As near as he could judge he was travelling for about twenty minutes. This told him little, because the car might have gone straight to its objective, or, on the other hand, it might have gone round in circles to confuse him. He tried to memorize the turns, but this is harder to do in practice than in theory. Again, little reliance could be put on this. The car might be crossing its own tracks. During the journey he saw nothing.

It came to an end. He was pulled out. He was marched up steps. He counted four. Then floor covering under his feet told him he was in a house. Then came stairs. Fourteen. The scarf was removed and he found himself in a bedroom with his two guides. For the first time he was able to have a good look at them. As they backed to the door one said: 'Don't try to leave by the window. The dogs are savage.'

They went out. Ginger heard the door locked. He went straight to the window hoping to get an idea of his whereabouts. He learned little. He saw he was in a country house of some size standing in its own grounds. It was, as far as he could see, surrounded by trees. They cut off his view. A gravel drive disappeared from sight into them. He tried to open the window in order that, by leaning out, he would get a wider picture: but it was fixed by an anti-burglar device which needed a key to open it.

He understood the warning about the dogs when there walked into his range of vision, close to the house, three Alsations. He was not likely to invite their attentions because, as he had realized from the stairs, he was on the first floor, with a long drop to ground level. He could not see what was immediately below the windows.

He sat on the bed to think about the whole situation.

One thing was clear. This was no minor racket run by Canson, who might, or might not, be in the house. He didn't know. Not that it mattered particularly. Up to the moment it had been supposed that Canson was the head man of the show. Ginger now had doubts. It began to look as if he had broken into a criminal organization on a much larger scale than there had been reason to suspect. There was big money behind it. The house he was in, for instance. Aircraft are expensive both to buy and maintain. There was the house in the Rue Baldini, in Nice. There might be another establishment in Switzerland, since the company's planes went there. It was not surprising that Ginger began to wonder how far the ramifications of the organization extended.

What was going on? What were these people doing? He still had no idea.

There were several of them in it. Smuggling? It would have to be on a big scale to be worth while. Drug running? On a small scale it wouldn't pay all these people; yet on a big scale the Anti-Narcotics Bureau would soon get wind of it. He would have heard about it at the Yard. A spy ring? That was possible because it could have the backing of a hostile government. But would Canson, who after all was British, sink as low as that? Crime was one thing. Treason, a very different matter.

Ginger was alone for about an hour. Then his two guards reappeared to say they had come to take him downstairs. Someone wanted to see him. This was said quietly, without threats or a hint of violence.

Ginger went with them, downstairs, presently to be; shown into a large, comfortable room, expensively furnished as a library. There was one person there, a man seated in an arm-chair with both hands resting on an ebony, gold-mounted walking-stick. He was dressed in a single garment; a loose-fitting dressing-gown of black velvet. But the most unusual, not to say disconcerting, thing about him was the fact that he wore a black silk mask. For this reason only the lower part of his face could be seen; but the impression Ginger got was of a frail, elderly man, possibly an invalid.

He made a signal to the guards to retire. When they had gone he indicated another arm-chair and said in a pleasant, cultured voice: 'Sit down young man. I want to talk to you. Would you care for a drink?'

'Thanks. I would very much like a cup of tea,' answered Ginger, who realized this was where he would have to keep his wits about him. He had a vague idea of purpose of this interview. It would, he suspected, be more of an interrogation. And it soon turned out he was right.

The man touched a bell at his elbow. It was answered. Ginger couldn't see by whom as the door was behind him.

'Mr Hebblethwaite would like some tea,' said the man in the mask.

'Yes, sir.'

The velvet glove method, thought Ginger. While they were waiting he said: 'I have also some questions to ask you, if you're the man responsible for having me brought here. If the purpose of the mask you're wearing is to intimidate me, it fails.'

'Its purpose is to prevent you from seeing my face.'

'After what has happened you have good reason.' A tray with a pot of tea, cakes and biscuits, was put on a small table within easy reach of Ginger's chair. 'Do please help yourself,' said the man. 'And now let us get on. I am going to ask you some questions, and it will save trouble all round if you will answer them briefly and truthfully. According to your passport you are a student. What are you studying?'

'My passport is my private property, and the particulars it gives are no concern of yours,' answered Ginger stiffly.

'That is where you are mistaken. Let us put it this way. For whom are you working? Could it by any chance be a newspaper?'



‘Instead of asking personal questions don’t you think it’s time you gave me an explanation of—’

‘All in good time. I shall get the answers to these questions, you may be sure. I hoped you would save my time, and your own, by providing them here and now. Be reasonable, and try to see things from my point of view. I run a big business, a secret business if you like, for which I take every possible step to prevent my methods becoming known to my competitors. You have chosen to interfere. Let us start at the beginning. You went to France with the deliberate intention of prying into my affairs — no, don’t waste your breath denying it. Naturally, I am anxious to know what interests you represent. It is also of importance to me to know what gave you the idea that the Sunnitours Travel Agency might not be all that it purported to be.’

‘Isn’t it? I gathered the impression it was a genuine concern; and I still have no reason to think otherwise.’

‘That’s very interesting. Then why didn’t you go to the Antibes hostel with the rest of the party?’

‘I thought I was free to go anywhere. There was nothing in the rules about staying under supervision. I decided to have a look at Nice.’

‘And instead of staying in the sophisticated quarter, as would have been natural for a tourist, you went directly to that most insalubrious area, the Old Town. Why?’ The speaker’s eyes never for a moment left Ginger’s face.

By this time Ginger was convinced of one thing. His questioner was worried, or he wouldn’t go to this trouble to ascertain who he was and why he went to Nice.

Said Ginger: ‘I wouldn’t say I went directly to the Old Town. When I left the plane I took a taxi. It dropped me on the front. After that I really had no idea of where I was going.’

‘Why did you choose the Rue Baldini?’

‘Where’s that?’

‘In the Old Town. The street where you had some trouble.’

‘I see what you mean. I didn’t choose to go there.’

‘What made you decide to go there?’

‘If anything it was the pilot of the plane.’

‘That’s very interesting. How did it happen?’

‘I thought I recognized him. I saw him turn into a dark street and wondered what there was in it worth seeing. A night club, or something of that sort, perhaps.’

‘I’d like to believe that. But wouldn’t it be more correct to say you followed Mr Canson?’

‘Who’s he?’ inquired Ginger, feigning ignorance.

‘The pilot.’

‘Well yes, I suppose that’s right. I’ve already said so.’

‘What made you stop where he stopped?’

‘To see what there was there. To look where he’d gone. I can’t see

anything strange about that. There was an old woman sitting in an alley. I didn't see her until she spoke. She begged for money. I gave her some and went on.'

'Then you came back. Why?'

'I didn't want to lose my way. I decided to go back to the main road. The next thing I knew I was set upon by a couple of ruffians. The old woman was in with them. She must have fetched them from somewhere. I managed to get away.'

'And ran for your life.'

'Wouldn't you?'

The man smiled.

Ginger perceived that Canson had lost no time in telling his questioner all that had happened in Nice.

The man went on. 'I see you're a smart lad; but not smart enough, I'm afraid, to undertake that sort of job that took you to Nice. Who sent you?'

'Why should anyone send me?'

'That's what I'm asking you.'

Ginger decided to take a new line, and in a way carry war into enemy country. He might be able to give man opposite more food for thought. It was dangerous but his position could hardly be worse than it was.

'All right,' he said. 'I'll be frank with you. The man responsible for me going into the Old Town was Canson.'

'Ah! So you knew his name all the time.'

'I did. But when he was first mentioned I decided it wasn't for me to say what I knew about him.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Do you insist on knowing?'

'I do.'

'Very well. I recognized Canson at the aerodrome. We were in the Air Force at the same time, so, naturally, I knew about his record. But perhaps you knew about that.'

'About what?' The masked man was frowning.

'His court martial.'

'What did he do?'

'He had been in trouble before for helping himself to government property, but his worst effort was when, as Mess Secretary, he faked the accounts of other officers to pay his own mess bill.'

'Indeed. I find that most interesting. Go on.'

'At Millham I was surprised to see he was still flying. Later, seeing him in Nice, I wondered what he was up to.'

'I see. And you decided to do a little private detective work, eh?'

'Say I was curious. I'm still on the Reserve of Officers.'

'What did you discover?'

'Nothing.'

‘Is that true?’

‘Absolutely. You know what happened. I lost sight of him in the Old Town and I didn’t see him again until he came to the hostel this morning to fetch me.’

‘That reminds me. Who sent the message asking you to come home?’

‘Ask Canson. He told me he took the message over the phone, but he didn’t say who sent it. Of course, he may not have known. Someone must have gone to the Sunnitours office in London asking if it was possible to get a message through to me. That could have been one of several people.’

‘Are you saying you didn’t expect to see Canson at the hostel?’

‘I am. Why should I? It was a surprise to me. And now I’ve told you all I know will you please tell me what all this is about? And as you brought me here by force perhaps you’ll be kind enough to find me transport to the nearest railway station. I’m anxious to get on home.’

‘There’s no hurry. I’m glad to be able to tell you your brother is out of danger.’

‘I’m relieved to hear it,’ returned Ginger, knowing this was a lie, as he had no brother. ‘And after all this isn’t it time you told me your name, for future reference?’

‘Call me Mr X.’

‘You’re making this sound very melodramatic. Is it necessary?’

‘Very much so,’ was the dry retort. ‘But forget about that. In the circumstances there appears to be no reason why you shouldn’t return to Nice and finish your holiday. That’s up to you. We can’t expect Sunnitours to lay on a special plane, but no doubt Mr Canson will be going back to Nice in a day or two.’

‘It seems hardly worth while.’

‘You could stay here, handy for the aerodrome, until a plane is ready.’

‘I’d rather go home.’

Mr X shook his head. ‘I’m sorry, but I can’t allow you to do that.’

‘But this is monstrous. You can’t hold me here against my will!’

‘I’m afraid I shall have to.’

‘Why?’

‘Purely as a safety precaution to protect my business. I shall have to make further inquiries about you.’

‘You’ve no right to keep me here.’

‘It isn’t a matter of right, young man. It’s a matter of necessity.’

‘Haven’t I told you enough?’

‘No. What you have told me sounds plausible but I’m not altogether satisfied.’

‘Aren’t you afraid I shall kick up a fuss about this?’

‘Not in the least. If my inquiries about you confirm your story I shall recompense you for any inconvenience I may have caused you. If, on the other hand, you turn out to be a spy, I shall have no alternative than to see you

are never able to report what you know to anyone. I trust I have made myself clear. That's all for now.'

Mr X touched a bell.

The guards came in, Ginger was returned to his room.

## CHAPTER 7

### BIGGLES IS WORRIED

A LITTLE after nine o'clock the morning after Ginger's departure, as soon as he thought the Sunnitours office would be open, Biggles sent the message as arranged. He had discussed this with Bertie and reached the decision that the most satisfactory way to do this might be through the Sunnitours organization which would be in touch with both Millham aerodrome and the hostel in the South of France. At all events he would speak to them and accept their advice.

He called them on the telephone, and having explained the fictitious accident asked that Mr Hebblethwaite be brought home forthwith. Somewhat to his surprise, and certainly to his gratification, the office manager, to whom he spoke, could not have been more helpful. He said he would attend to it at once. It could be left to him. He would speak to Mr Canson, the pilot. They could expect Mr Hebblethwaite home some time later in the day.

This was easier than Biggles had expected. He thought some excuse would be made for a delay. Well satisfied he thanked the manager for his co-operation and congratulated the travel agency on its efficiency.

What he did not realize, of course, was that Canson was still in Nice. When the manager had said he would call him on the phone he supposed it would be at Millham aerodrome. The whole idea of the scheme was that Canson would fly out in the Auster, which he said was maintained for such emergencies, and bring Ginger home. In that way Ginger would have seen the full service in operation. Not for a moment did it occur to Biggles that Canson might still be in Nice, and that Ginger would be flown home in the machine used for the outward journey. The Dove.

So easily can misunderstandings occur to thwart the best laid plans.

Later, when he realized what had happened, he blamed himself for departing from the original project, which was to make contact directly with Ginger by telegram and leave him to make the arrangement about-coming home. However, Sunnitours had the facilities, and seemed so anxious to oblige that he did not hesitate to accept their offer.

It was not long before he had cause to suspect that something had gone wrong.

As they had nothing urgently needing attention he suggested they might fly over Millham and check the time of departure of Canson's Auster — as they supposed. This would give them a rough idea of the time Ginger might be expected back.

They did this. Biggles' only fear being that Canson would have left for France before their arrival over the airfield. This apparently had not happened, because when, flying high, they cruised past, the Auster could be seen

standing on the tarmac. The engine was dead. There was no one in sight, but Canson's Rolls could be seen standing beside the hangar.

Biggles saw nothing strange in this. His only remark was 'He's late getting away. If he leaves it much longer it'll take him all his time to get back before dark.'

'I can't see the Dove,' said Bertie.

'It's probably in the hangar,' returned Biggles. 'If it isn't wanted there would be no reason to bring it out.'

From which it may be judged that Biggles still had no suspicion of the truth.

He flew on for a little while and then made a wide sweep back.

Nothing had changed. The Auster still stood in the same place, engines silent. There was no sign of activity.

'Considering I told the man at Sunnitours that the matter was urgent Canson seems to be treating the job pretty casually,' said Biggles irritably. 'I'm beginning to wish I'd sent the wire direct to Ginger.'

'Maybe they're busy in the London office and the message to Canson got held up,' offered Bertie by way of explanation.

'It could hardly have been held up all this time. But this is like Canson. He never hurried over anything unless it suited him.'

Again Biggles flew on, anxious not to give the impression that he was hanging about in the vicinity of the aerodrome in case Canson should wonder what the machine was doing. This time he was away for about twenty minutes. When he returned it was to see a man get into the Auster, start the engines and taxi slowly into the hangar.

'There's something wrong about this,' declared Biggles. 'Absolutely.'

'If that aircraft was going anywhere today there'd be no point in putting it back in the hangar.'

'It looks to me as if the fellow who's just put it away is going off duty,' observed Bertie. 'There he goes, on a motor bike. Why not land to see what goes on?'

'No. What reason could we give Canson for turning up again so soon? We couldn't ask him what we want to know. To land would do more harm than good.'

'Canson may not be there.'

'His car's there.'

'True enough.'

'I think our best bet is to go to the Sunnitours office and make inquiries there. They're bound to know what has happened. There may be a simple explanation.'

'You don't think anything could have happened to Ginger?'

'Of course not. How could anything have happened to him? No. It's just that the arrangements Sunnitours said they'd make haven't worked out. One can't rely on anybody any more.'

Biggles headed for home. By this time it was after two o'clock, so they had lunch before going on by taxi to the Sunnitours office.

'We shall have to be a bit cagey about the questions we ask,' said Biggles, as they went in. 'I hope we don't bump into Canson. That would throw a spanner in the gears. There's just a chance he might be here.'

'We saw his car at Millham.'

'He could have got here by now.'

In the event this awkward situation did not arise.

To the smiling girl who came forward to attend to them Biggles said: 'I'm the man who rang you up this morning about bringing home Mr Hebblethwaite, who was on yesterday's tour to the Riviera. His brother—'

'Oh, yes. I know all about it,' broke in the girl, brightly.

'Good. I've just looked in to make sure you were able to fix things up.'

'Don't worry. Everything's been taken care of.'

'Can you give me an idea of what time I can expect Mr Hebblethwaite home?'

'I can't say exactly. Some time this afternoon, or this evening at latest. It would depend on what time the plane started. The pilot, Mr Canson, was anxious to make an early start.'

Biggles looked puzzled. 'Are you sure of that?'

'I wouldn't say so if I wasn't sure. I spoke to Mr Canson myself, soon after you rang up. He said he'd slip along to the hostel, pick up your friend and fly him home.'

'I don't quite understand. If he was at Millham how could he slip along to the hostel—'

'But he wasn't at Millham. I caught him at his hotel in Nice.'

'You mean... he didn't come home last night.'

'That's right. He stayed in Nice. He often does that.'

'I see,' said Biggles slowly, understanding now why the Auster was still at Millham. 'I suppose that means he'll fly home in the plane he took out.'

'Exactly. It was lucky he stayed, otherwise it would have meant a special journey.'

'That's what I imagined would happen. Not knowing the facts, perhaps I was anxious, I jumped to the wrong conclusion.'

'You'll find it'll be quite all right,' asserted the girl cheerfully. 'We'll have your friend home as soon as possible. Mr Canson may be back a little later than usual because of his having to go to the hostel at Antibes to collect him. It's some little way from Nice. Then again, there's always a chance that Mr Hebblethwaite may have gone out, in which case he'd either have to wait or go to look for him, perhaps at the beach.'

'Of course,' agreed Biggles. 'I realize that. Well, thanks very much for being patient with me.'

'It's been a pleasure. That's what I'm here for you know. Don't worry. The plane might be back any time now, if it isn't back already.'

‘How will Mr Hebblethwaite get to London? Can you provide transport?’

‘Naturally. It’s part of our service. No doubt Mr Canson will fix that.’

‘Good. That’s a load off my mind. Thanks again.’

‘Don’t mention it.’

Biggles and Bertie went out into the street.

‘What do you make of that?’ asked Bertie, as they waited to pick up a cruising taxi.

‘I don’t quite know what to make of it, and that’s a fact,’ answered Biggles thoughtfully. ‘I’m pretty sure of one thing. That girl was telling the truth as far as she knew it. If there was anything funny going on she wouldn’t have been so frank.’

‘But you’re not altogether happy about it?’

‘I am not. Things haven’t worked out as I planned; but how was I to know Canson would stay the night in Nice? Even so, if he did what he said he would do I should have thought Ginger would be back by now. There’s something about this that doesn’t quite add up. I’ll tell you what. You fly down to Millham and cast an eye over the tarmac to see if the Dove is back. Don’t go too low. There’s just a remote chance that it had engine trouble and dropped in somewhere to get it put right. I’ll go to the Yard and wait in the office in case Ginger turns up, or phones to say he’s at home.’

‘Good enough, old boy.’

They took the first taxi that came along and went to Scotland Yard. There Bertie took his own car to get to the operations airfield. Biggles went to his office, and before doing anything else rang the Operations Room to order an aircraft to be ready for Bertie when he arrived. There was nothing more he could do.

Thinking the matter over it was easy to understand how his plan had miscarried; but he still could not see how the ultimate result had been affected. It simply meant that Ginger would return in the Dove, which was on the spot, instead of being fetched in the Auster kept for emergencies. It seemed not unreasonable that Canson would spend the night in Nice.

Time passed. There was no word from Ginger. He was getting really worried when Bertie walked in.

‘Well?’ queried Biggles quickly.

‘The Dove’s back.’

‘It is!’

‘Yes. I think it must have been back some time. It wasn’t on the tarmac. It had been pulled into the hangar, but the doors were wide open so I could just see its tail.’

‘Was anyone about?’

‘Not a soul.’

‘Was Canson’s car still there?’

‘No. It had gone.’

Biggles sat back, shaking his head. ‘There’s still something about this I



don't understand. If Ginger came home in the Dove he should be here by now. Put it like this. I rang Sunnitours this morning just after nine. The girl has told us she spoke to Canson, in Nice, right away. He said he'd go straight along to pick up Ginger. Allow half an hour for him to get to Antibes and the same time to get back to Nice airport. The Dove should have got away by ten-thirty. Call it eleven o'clock. The Dove cruises at a hundred and eighty. Giving it four hours to get home it should have touched down at Millham by three. It's now after seven. Surely it wouldn't take Ginger four hours to get here from Millham?"

'There may not have been transport available.'

'The girl in the office said transport would be provided. What about Canson's car? If he didn't bring Ginger to London he could have run him to the nearest railway station. Anyhow, had there been a delay Ginger could have phoned us to say he was back and might be late.'

'I think you're worrying yourself unnecessarily. What's on your mind?'

'I'm beginning to wonder if Ginger came home in the Dove.'

'Oh, but here, come off it, old boy. With the Dove already at Nice, why on earth shouldn't he come home in it? Canson was bound to come home. There'd be no sense in sending out the Auster.'

'Forget the Auster. It wasn't sent out. We know that. We saw it.'

'Okay, laddie. Have it your way. I still say Ginger will turn up presently with a perfectly natural explanation to account for the hold-up.'

Biggles shrugged and lit a cigarette. 'Well, there's nothing more we can do for the moment. We'll hang on. I agree, there's still a chance he may walk in.'

A long pause. Then Bertie said: 'If anything fishy happened on the flight Ginger may be doing a spot of scouting at Millham.'

'Yes, I suppose that could happen,' conceded Biggles. 'But I find it hard to believe.'

'Why?'

'Because if Ginger saw anything irregular he'd come back here hot foot to let me know.'

They waited until eight-thirty. Ginger did not come. They went home to the flat hoping they might find him there. He was not there.

'It's no use kidding ourselves any longer,' said Biggles grimly. 'He's not coming home tonight or he'd have been here before this.'

'When Canson went to Antibes to fetch him he may have found he'd gone out for the day.'

'He wouldn't go out for the day.'

'Why not?'

'Because he was expecting a telegram from me.'

'Yes, of course. I'd forgotten that. It was just an idea. What are we going to do about it?'

'We'll go out and have a meal. If he isn't here when we get back we'll start thinking seriously.'

‘I say it’s too soon to get upset. After all, you know how messages can get scrambled. I’d make a bet he’s still at the hostel wondering why you didn’t send the telegram.’

‘I hope you’re right. It’s too late to do anything tonight, but if he isn’t back by the morning I’m flying to France to cast an eye over this hostel set-up. The first thing is to satisfy ourselves he isn’t there.’

‘And if he isn’t?’

‘We shall have to find out what time he left, and with whom.’

‘If the show is crooked we can’t expect the people in charge of the hostel to tell us anything.’

‘There were other people on the flight. They can’t all be crooked. We could rely on them to tell us all they know about Ginger’s movements.’

‘Before we dash off why not have a word with the Sunnitours office here in London. They’d know if Ginger flew back in the Dove.’

‘I don’t see why they should. All they’ll know is what Canson cares to tell them. They might believe him, but I wouldn’t.’

‘Then let’s tackle Canson and get the truth out of him.’

‘I’ve already said, the last thing you’re likely to get out of Canson is the truth,’ declared Biggles. ‘The more he knows the less likely will he be to talk. He’s a dead loss. Once he is suspicious of us the harder will it be to get to the bottom of this business. Let’s go out and have something to eat.’

## CHAPTER 8

### THE MYSTERY DEEPENS

BIGGLES went to bed late, having waited in vain for Ginger. He was up early, still to no purpose. Bertie, hearing him moving about, rose to find him brooding over a cup of tea and a cigarette.

‘So he hasn’t come,’ said Bertie.

‘Not a sign.’

‘What can have happened to him?’

‘I’ve been turning over in my mind the possibilities, but it’s all guesswork. He may have tried watching Canson and went too far. That would lead to trouble. The devil of it is, if that did happen, it could have been in France or in England. We don’t know, and the only way we shall find out is by trying both ends of the Sunnitours airline for a clue. I feel like trying the hostel at Antibes first. We do at least know he went to France, but we don’t know if he came back. I’ll ask the switchboard at the Yard to let the Air Commodore know what we’re doing; then we’ll get cracking.’

By seven o’clock they were on their way. They landed at Nice at eleven. After the usual formalities, simplified by their Interpol *carnets*, they took a taxi and went straight to the hostel. Doors and windows were open but there was no one about. As they paused to survey the place a woman came out to shake a duster. She was a buxom, cheerful-looking housewife type who smiled when she saw them.

Biggles addressed her, speaking of course in French, ‘*Bonjour, madame*. Do you work here, if I may ask?’

‘*Oui, monsieur*.’

‘I think a friend of ours is staying here. As we were in Nice we thought we would call on him.’

‘Everyone has gone to the beach for the day, to bathe.’

‘Ah, yes. I should have expected that.’

‘What is the name of your friend?’

‘Monsieur Hebblethwaite. You know him? He arrived with the last party from England.’

‘Certainly. But he is not here now.’

‘Where is he?’

‘He has gone home.’

‘So soon?’

‘His brother is ill.’

‘Did he tell you that?’

‘No. Monsieur Canson, who is the pilot of the plane. He came here to fetch him.’

‘When was this?’

‘Yesterday morning.’

‘What time?’

The woman shrugged expressive shoulders. ‘I couldn’t say exactly. It was soon after breakfast, when I had mended his coat.’

‘Monsieur Hebblethwaite’s coat?’

‘Yes. Then he went out for a little while. When he came back Monsieur Canson was here, waiting, very annoyed because he was ready to fly back to England.’

‘Why did you have to mend the coat?’

‘The sleeve was torn. A long cut.’

‘Did he say how that happened?’

‘He told me he did it in Nice, before he came here.’

‘Then he didn’t come straight here from the airport with the rest of the party?’

‘No. He asked my husband, who drives the car that meets the plane at the airport, if he could take a walk in Nice and find his own way here when he was ready.’

‘That’s right, *monsieur*,’ said a man who had come out of the building to join the party. He wore a white apron.

‘Are you the driver?’

‘*Oui, monsieur*.’ The man grinned. ‘One of my jobs. I told the young man he could do anything he liked. I gave him exact directions for finding us before I left him outside the airport. He must have stayed in Nice for a long time. It was late when he got here,’ The man winked. ‘I think perhaps he had a little fun.’

‘Why do you think that?’

‘He has a bruise on his face.’

The woman came back. ‘Dinner was finished when he came, but he had some food and then went to bed.’

Said the man: ‘I noticed the tear in his jacket and said *madame* would be happy to mend it for him.’

‘And then what happened?’ prompted Biggles, finding the people friendly and frank.

The woman continued. ‘He was up early for his coffee. Then he went out. He came back in a taxi.’

‘Do you know where he went?’

‘No, *monsieur*. He did not say. In the meantime Monsieur Canson had arrived. He told me that Monsieur Hebblethwaite might wish to go home and he had come to fetch him. He was angry at being kept waiting.’

‘Did he have to wait long?’

‘No. But he was in a hurry. He asked me for the passport of Monsieur Hebblethwaite to save time when he came.’

‘Did you give it to him?’

‘Yes. I had taken the particulars.’

‘Then what happened?’

‘They spoke for a little while. Then Monsieur Hebblethwaite packed his bag and they went away together in Monsieur Canson’s car.’

‘And you haven’t seen him since?’

‘No. He must have decided to go to England in the plane.’

‘Ah well. It is a pity we missed him. He may have guessed we would come to see him. Did he by any chance leave a message?’

‘Not with me,’ said the woman.

Her husband shook his head, ‘He said nothing to me.’

‘I wonder if he left a message in his room, in case we came? He has sometimes done that.’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Would you mind if I looked, to make sure?’

‘Look, *monsieur*, if you wish, but I don’t think you will find anything. I’ve cleaned the room ready for the next visitor. Number five. Come, I will show you.’

They followed the woman to the room Ginger had occupied. There she left them, saying she would have to get on with her work. If they wanted her they would find her in the kitchen.

Biggles’ eyes went round the room with its simple furniture. It was spotless. The bed had been made, the floor polished. The window was wide open.

‘Nothing here,’ said Bertie. ‘Did you really expect to find anything?’

‘I thought there was just a chance. Ginger must have got into some sort of trouble in Nice or how did he tear his jacket and get a bruise on his face? It struck me that if he was in danger, knowing we’d follow him up he’d leave us a clue.’ Biggles’ eyes were going over the walls. He was near the window when a breeze moved the curtain. ‘What’s this?’ he said sharply, taking a pace forward.

They read Ginger’s message together, in silence, decoding it.

‘So that’s it,’ breathed Biggles. ‘He ran into trouble in Nice, presumably at the address he’s given us. He must have followed Canson to it. Why else should he have gone there? The fact that he wrote this, obviously for our benefit, can only mean that he didn’t feel safe, even here. I’d like to know when he wrote this — if it was when he first came home or after he had spoken to Canson. That could be important, particularly if it was the result of something Canson said when he came to fetch him.’

‘Canson himself may have learned something here, from Ginger’s passport. That was a queer thing to do — collect his passport. Was it really to save time?’

‘No. He wanted to see the particulars in it.’

‘He could have done that on the way out, or when they were checked at Nice Airport.’

‘The obvious answer to that is, the need had not arisen. If that’s right, it

follows that he wanted to see it as a result of something that happened in Nice.'

'Something to arouse his suspicions.'

'That, I'd say, is the answer. The big question is, where did Canson take Ginger when he left here? Was it to the airport — or to this address Ginger has given us in Nice.'

'Let's go and have a look at it.'

'That's our next move, as we're here. There's one thing I am sure of. Whatever is going on the caretakers here know nothing about it. If they were aware of anything crooked they wouldn't have talked as freely as they have, or I'm no judge of human nature.'

At this juncture the woman came back. 'Have you finished, *messieurs*? I must close the window now.'

'Yes, thank you, *madame*. No doubt we shall see our friend when we get back to England. May I offer you a little *pour boire* for being so helpful.' Biggles slipped her a tip.

'*Merci, monsieur.*'

'*Au revoir, madame.*'

'*Au revoir, messieurs.*'

They went out. Their taxi was waiting. 'You can take us to Nice, now,' ordered Biggles.

'*Oui, monsieur.* The address?'

'The Rue Baldini.'

The driver hesitated. 'I can't take you all the way.'

'Why not?'

'The Rue Baldini is too narrow for traffic. It is in the Old Town.'

'Then take us as close as you can get.'

'Certainly, *monsieur.*'

They set off on a pleasant drive along the coast road. Little was said on the way, and conversation was kept to general subjects as it would be overheard by the driver, who for all they knew might be able to speak English. He stopped at the entrance to a narrow street on the fringe of the Old Town. '*Voilà, messieurs.* Rue Baldini.'

Biggles paid the fare and he departed.

'Now,' said Biggles. 'We'll take it slowly, goofing about like a couple of tourists who have never seen such a place before. We're looking for a photographic shop, but when we come to it don't look too hard. It may be nothing very much, but it may be red hot.'

'I get it,' said Bertie.

They strolled down the street, sometimes stopping to gaze at a unique feature. There were quite a few people about, mostly women with empty shopping baskets going to, or coming from the nearby market with baskets piled high, long sticks of bread projecting.

'This must be it,' said Biggles softly, as they reached their objective.

‘There are not likely to be two photographic shops in a dive like this.’

On the occasion of Ginger’s visit night had hidden the blemishes, but in the broad light of day the establishment presented a depressing picture of the drab, squalid dilapidation that results from age and neglect. Most of the buildings in the street were in much the same state so there was nothing remarkable in this. An old woman dressed in faded black sat in the entrance to an alley close by eating a piece of bread and olives which lay at her side on a scrap of newspaper.

Biggles paused only long enough to glance through a dirty glass window at a display of fly-speckled photographs. He succeeded, where Ginger had failed, in reading the words, almost obscured by dirt, on the plate by the door. They were: *Armand Mattio. Photographre Gravure*. He merely glanced at this in passing and joined Bertie, who had strolled on.

After dawdling a little way they came to a turning to the right. Biggles took it and stopped, lighting a cigarette.

‘Well?’ queried Bertie.

‘I didn’t learn much. The shop is run by a man named Mattio who calls himself a photographer and engraver, or a photographic engraver, which I take to mean he can make etchings from his portraits. By the look of the place he doesn’t do much business.’

‘I’ll tell you one thing. When I turned to wait for you that old dame had poked out her head to see where we were going.’

‘What else has she to look at apart from the odd stranger? Old women will do that in any village at home.’

‘Well, what do we do?’

‘You mean, to find out if Ginger was brought here?’

‘Yes.’

‘There’s nothing we can do about it. We’ve no right to barge into the house and to ask questions could only do more harm than good. Yet somehow Ginger must have been involved in the place or he wouldn’t have left that message. What did he expect us to do about it?’

‘Maybe he didn’t expect us to do anything; it could have been his way of passing on a piece of useful information.’

‘That may be the answer, but I have a feeling that when he wrote on the wall he was expecting trouble. Why write on the wall? Why not a note? I’d say he was pressed for time. Canson was waiting for him. We know that. They had a conversation, but what it was about we don’t know. I’m pretty sure it was after that, and possibly as a result of that, Ginger wrote the message. He knew that if he didn’t come home we’d come here; and that can only mean he thought there was a chance he might not come home.’

‘Yet you say there’s nothing more we can do here?’

‘Nothing. If we knew for certain Ginger was in that shop it would be a different matter. We could call in the police. But for all we know he may have gone back to England in the Dove. Come to think of it we should be able to

settle that at the airport. Someone must have checked him out. The National Security officer would want to see his passport and the Customs people look at his baggage. Let's try it. We'll forget this place for the time being.'

They found a way out of the Old Town and on a boulevard picked up a taxi. In twenty minutes they were at the airport.

Using his Interpol papers Biggles started his inquiries, and without any difficulty learned all he wanted to know: the time of departure of the Dove with its one passenger whose passport was in the name of Hebblethwaite. There were two pilots, both well known at the airport. Their names were Canson and Rawlings.

'So Ginger *did* go back with Canson after all,' said Biggles, when he was alone with Bertie in the reception hall. 'We must assume the machine went to Millham. The question is now, did Canson go straight there and ask for a Customs check or did he make a landing at a proper Customs airport? We should be able to work that out when we get home.'

'You're not going back to the Rue Baldini?'

'There's no point in it. I'm going flat out for home. It seems that Canson's old pal Rawlings has managed to get a pilot's ticket.'

'What I don't understand,' said Bertie, 'is this. If Ginger flew to England with Canson why didn't he come home, or at any rate get in touch with us somehow.'

'I don't understand it either,' returned Biggles. 'That's the next problem to be solved. Let's get on with it.'

The flight home was uneventful, but it was late evening before they were in the Air Police office at Scotland Yard, having confirmed that Ginger had not returned to the flat.

Using two telephones they got busy checking all Customs airports at which the Dove (giving its registration) might have landed on the way to its base. This produced no result. Biggles then asked the head office of Customs and Excise to ascertain if Millham had requested the services of a special officer. The answer was no.

All this took a good deal of time, and they were both showing signs of weariness when Biggles finally sat back and lit a cigarette.

'So that's that,' he said. 'So Canson had the brass face to land at home without going through Customs. How long does he think he can get away with that sort of thing?'

'We could nail him on that. We know the Dove is here. I saw it.'

Biggles shook his head sadly. 'He'll have an excuse ready you may be sure. He'd get away with a fine and we still wouldn't know what he'd been up to. We'd have shown our hand for nothing.'

'It beats me that he dare risk dodging Customs. Why?'

'If you're asking me I'd say because he had Ginger on board and wasn't giving him a chance to speak to anyone. It's pretty clear now that Ginger must have slipped up somehow. Canson's got him and he's not letting him go. I



only hope it's nothing worse.'

'But look here, old boy, we shall have to do something about this.'

'We'll deal with it tomorrow. We've had a long day. We couldn't do anything tonight, anyhow. Let's go home and sleep on it.'

## CHAPTER 9

### WHAT NEXT?

THE next morning Bertie's first question was: 'Any word from him?' There was no need to mention Ginger by name.

Biggles shook his head. 'Nothing. I don't like it.'

Over an early breakfast Bertie asked: 'Have you any bright ideas?'

'I have some ideas, but how bright they are remains to be seen,' answered Biggles. 'Lately my bright ideas seem to drift off the beam. I thought it was a bright idea to send Ginger on a trip with Canson but it doesn't look very bright at this moment. Let's face it. I didn't foresee a situation like this and I couldn't have imagined it.'

'You knew Canson was as crooked as a corkscrew.'

'I knew he used to be, which isn't quite the same thing. I was working entirely on suspicion. I'd no proof of anytime underhand. Canson is one of those men who are never content with what they've got, and knowing that I thought he might be working some minor racket on his own account. In view of what's happened it begins to look as if I was wrong. This is a bigger thing than I suspected. It must be, or Canson would never have gone so far as to interfere with Ginger. At least, as Ginger hasn't reported back we can only conclude that's what has happened. Had it been possible for him to get m touch with us he would have done so. He wouldn't leave us in the air like this.'

'You really think Canson has got him?'

'What else are we to think?'

'Let's suppose you're right. What does Canson hope to gain by it?'

'I wouldn't know.'

'Where could Canson keep him? He must live somewhere but I can't see him taking him home.'

'Neither can I. He could hardly lock him up at the aerodrome; there's no building suitable for that. If he isn't there he could be anywhere. I have a feeling there's more to this business than we know; that Canson isn't alone in whatever it is he's doing.'

'Well, what are *we* going to do about it? It's time we were doing something.'

'For a start I'm going to Paris.'

'Why Paris?'

'To have a word with Marcel Brissac of *la Sûreté*.'

'Couldn't you phone him?'

'No. There's too much to say. I want him to understand exactly what has happened. He can lay on a man to keep an eye on that shop in the Rue Baldini, in Nice. That fits somewhere into the jigsaw. I'll give him a

description of Canson in case he goes there again. I'll also give him the registration of the Dove. If he knows it's under suspicion he'll watch it every time it enters France.'

'Are you going alone?'

'I am. I have a job for you. It may lead to nothing but it's the only thing I can think of. I'm reckoning that if Canson has got Ginger put away somewhere he'll go to see him from time to time. He'd hardly leave him to starve to death. The chances are that when he goes — in fact, wherever he goes — he'll use his car. You can't mistake it. Big crooks love big expensive cars. It's one of their weaknesses. Vanity, of course. This is what I want you to do. Take the Proctor and fly over Millham. If the Rolls is there, watch it. See where it goes. As long as it keeps out of heavy traffic, and there isn't much traffic on that secondary road that serves the airfield, that shouldn't be too difficult. Failing the car you can watch the airfield for any sort of activity. Keep high, and don't circle too close. Play cagey. A sudden burst of aviation could set Canson wondering what it's about.'

'Leave it to me.'

'Right. There's no hurry for you. I don't suppose Canson will be on the job before nine o'clock. It might be a good idea if you took the pistol-grip camera with you to get oblique shots of any place Canson visits. Apart from having a record for future identification we could study the pictures at leisure.'

'I'll do that.'

'I'll ring Marcel's office to let him know I'm coming. We can't fix any time for getting together again because neither of us knows when we shall be finished. Whoever's back first can go to the Yard and wait.'

'How long do you want me to watch Millham?'

'I'll leave that to you. Say, until you see something worth reporting. If nothing happens, carry on as long as possible even if it means refuelling. Let's go. If this doesn't get us anywhere I shall have to see the Air Commodore and report Ginger missing.'

Presently they went their respective ways. Biggles to the Yard to phone French police headquarters on the private line, and Bertie, in his own car, to the Air Police hangar to prepare for his reconnaissance.

When, some time later, he arrived over Millham, the place looked dead; or at any rate deserted. The hangar doors were closed, which suggested there was to be no flying in the near future. He cruised on and, circling high, watched the airfield from a distance. This was a simple matter, as the weather had remained fine, with the only cloud a few flecks of cirrus far above. Visibility was good. On the country roads there was little traffic.

Shortly after ten o'clock he saw a man, presumably one of the ground staff, arrive at the airfield on a motorcycle. The rider parked his machine, entered a building and soon afterwards came out dressed in overalls. He opened the hangar door and disappeared inside, evidently to do some work, for he remained there.

A little while after this another man arrived in a small car. He did precisely the same thing, joining the man in the hangar.

It was nearly an hour before anything else happened, and Bertie, who had kept at a distance, was getting a little bored when he saw a big car travelling slowly up the accommodation road that led to the administrative buildings. Having plenty of altitude he cut his engine for silence and glided close enough to be able to recognize a dark green Rolls. Canson's car. It went on to the hangar. Someone, too far off to be identified, got out and went into the hangar. Bertie sheered off, making S turns to keep the aerodrome in sight.

He was thinking he might have done better on the ground, and even considered landing in a nearby field to continue his investigation on foot, when he would be able to get nearer. It was as well he did not do so, because after a few minutes he saw the Rolls moving off in the direction from which it had come. He kept his eyes on it, feeling more comfortable, knowing that with the car in motion the driver would be less likely to hear him and would probably pay no attention if he did. Determined not to lose his quarry he risked losing a little height, confident that Canson would never suspect he was being shadowed from the air.

He didn't attempt to guess where the Rolls might be going. It could be anywhere. As long as it went somewhere, that was all that mattered. His only fear was that its destination might be in a big town, where he would almost certainly lose it in the traffic. Great was his satisfaction, therefore, when after covering about five miles, during which distance it passed through the little village of Millham, it turned into a short drive which ended at what can best be described as a mansion house; a large building of mellow red brick with outbuildings, extensive gardens, a broad lawn and some fine ornamental trees and shrubs.

Bertie was now alert, for this could only be the objective of the vehicle he was following. He was also mildly surprised, for to run such an establishment would obviously be an expensive undertaking; not the sort of place a man in Canson's financial position could afford. It began to look as if Biggles' theory, that Canson was engaged in a bigger enterprise than had at first been supposed, was right. And he was not alone in it. There was big money involved.

Keeping well to one side, flying at a speed only just above stalling point, he watched the Rolls stop at the front door. The driver was admitted. Bertie would still have been unable to swear that the man was Canson; but it was certainly Canson's car, and that was all that mattered. Canson would not be far away from it. This, for the moment, was as much as Bertie needed to know.

Half turning away he opened a side window and picked up his camera, the 'pistol' type used for shooting oblique photographs, lying handy on the seat beside him. Holding it at the ready he flew across the front of the house, quickly taking shots from different angles. He flew on for some distance

before he turned and came back, this time taking snaps of the back of the house. After this he did not turn, but carried right on, feeling he had done enough. To remain near the house might well cause anyone inside to wonder what the aircraft was doing. In any case he could not expect to learn much more if he hung about. Canson might stay in the house for hours.

What he decided to do, and what in fact he did, was fly back to base and hand in his photographs to be developed. He had a cup of tea while his tanks were being topped up, and then, really to occupy himself knowing that Biggles would not yet be back from France, he made another sortie to Suffolk.

Flying high he first passed near the house in the park. The Rolls was no longer at the door; but he spotted something he had not previously noticed, concentrating as he had on getting the photographs. Animals were wandering about on the lawn. Using binoculars he made them out to be dogs. He counted five. Why so many? he wondered. Was the place a kennels, for training police dogs, guide dogs for the blind, or something of that sort? He decided that Canson, or his friends if they were anything like him, would not be interested in work of that nature.

He went to the aerodrome, and flying straight across observed an Auster on the tarmac with two men working on it. He couldn't see the Dove, but Canson's Rolls was parked in its usual place in the shade of the hangar. As it seemed likely that it would remain there for some time, perhaps for the rest of the day, he decided not to linger but return to base, which he did. In the Operations Room he spent some time studying the prints of his photographs, which were now ready. He learned nothing more, but he was well satisfied with them. The light had been good so they were clear and sharp. He tried to think of a way of learning the name of the house without going to the district; he considered ringing up the post office at Millham village, or the police-constable should there be one; but in the end he decided against it as an unnecessary risk. If word leaked out locally that inquiries were being made about the house only harm could come of it. It could wait.

The time was now getting on for two o'clock, so leaving the prints to dry — they were still damp — he went to the canteen and had a leisurely lunch. Afterwards he collected the prints and drove back to the Yard to await Biggles' return.

It was nearly four o'clock when Biggles walked in.

'How did you get on?' asked Bertie.

'All right. I had a long talk with Marcel. He understands the position. He's promised to lay on an experienced man to keep an eye on the Rue Baldini. He'll check up on anyone who uses the shop. He may recognize someone of whom he has a record. We can leave that end to him. How about you? Did you have any luck?'

'I think so. Canson came to the aerodrome in his Rolls. He didn't stay long. Afterwards I was able to track him to a big house only about four or five miles away. I got some pretty good shots of the place, front and back. Here they are.

Have a look at 'em.'

'I suppose you don't know the name of the house?'

'No. I know nothing about it. I thought it better not to start making inquiries until I'd seen you. I could only have got particulars on the spot.'

'No matter. We'll soon deal with it when we're ready.' Biggles was sitting at his desk studying the photographs through a magnifying glass. 'Are these dogs I see on the lawn?' he questioned.

'Yes.'

'Alsations?'

'That's what I took them to be.'

'H'm. Very interesting. One dog can be a pet but no one keeps a pack without good reason — particularly of Alsations. Could you find this place again from ground level?'

'Easily. No trouble at all.'

'Our next move, then, will be to have a closer look at it. Ginger may be there. It's quite certain now that he can't get back or he'd have been in touch before this.' Biggles was still looking at the photographs. 'These dogs present a problem. If they're allowed to run loose all day and night, getting near the house is going to be quite a business.'

'Are you going to apply for a search warrant?'

'No. Not yet. anyway. We haven't enough evidence to justify it. Remember, we're now faced not with one problem but two. We have to find Ginger, and we've also got to see what it is these people are up to. Canson is up to something and he's not alone in it. It looks more and more like big business.'

'Are you going to tell the Air Commodore how things stand?'

'I may have to, later, but at present I'd rather not. I put myself on this spot and I shall get off it under my own steam, if it's possible.'

At this point of the conversation there was a knock on the door and a uniformed constable came in.

Biggles looked up. 'What is it?'

'There's a gentleman below asking to see you.'

'Tell him I'm busy.'

'He says it's urgent.'

'Did he give his name?'

'Yes. It's Mr Canson. Mr Roderick Canson. He says you know him.'

The face that Biggles turned to Bertie wore an expression of utter incredulity. 'Well, so help me.' he breathed. 'I'm used to surprises, but this is one out of the top flight.'

'By gosh! He's got a nerve, coming here.' growled Bertie.

'That's where you're wrong. It isn't nerve. It's vanity. Plain swank. He thinks he's smarter than we are but he's not satisfied to let it go at that. He's got to prove it.'

'To us or to himself?'

‘Both, I’d say.’

‘He must be sure of his ground.’

‘His type always are. Well, we’ll see.’ Biggles turned to the constable. ‘All right. Bring him up.’

Quickly gathering the photographs that lay spread on the desk he put them out of sight in a drawer.

## CHAPTER 10

### CANSON MAKES A PROPOSITION

CANSON came in beaming. 'Hello — hello there, so this is where you do your sleuthing.' He selected a chair, dragged it up to Biggles' desk and sat down.

'Make yourself at home,' said Biggles, with frosty sarcasm.

It appeared to be lost on the visitor. 'I've got a bone to pick with you, Bigglesworth,' he stated belligerently.

'Then get on and pick it. I'm busy.'

'When you dropped in at Millham why didn't you tell me you were the big noise in the Air Police?'

'I don't go around shouting my business. You said you'd heard I was employed by the government. What more did you want? Who told you I was in the police, anyway?'

'Nobody told me. I worked that out for myself.'

'Is that what you've come here to tell me?'

'Not by a long chalk. I've come here to do a deal with you.'

'I don't do deals with people I don't know.'

'Don't know?'

'Well, say, people I don't like, if you'd rather have it that way.'

'You haven't forgotten that once we lived on the same station?'

'No, and I haven't forgotten what happened there.'

Canson made a deprecatory gesture. 'Oh, come now, don't say you're like the elephant that never forgets.'

'Suppose you come to the point.'

'Very well. You live with a young man named Hebblethwaite. Right?'

'Say he lives with me. What about it?'

'He's one of your assistants.'

'If you say so.'

'You sent him on a Sunnitours trip to check what I was doing.'

'Did he tell you that?'

'There was no need for him to tell me. It was too obvious. I'm not a fool, you know. I'll admit that at first I didn't know who he was or what his object might be; but when on his passport I saw the address Mount Street I made it my business to find out why a chap living in an expensive flat should choose the cheapest possible trip abroad. Who else lived at the address? Why, none other than Inspector Bigglesworth. And what was my old messmate Bigglesworth doing now? Top pilot of the Air Police. Then I knew why I had been honoured by his presence at my poor little airfield at Millham. It was as easy as that.'

'Very clever.'



Canson's expression hardened. 'You didn't just drop in, as you said. Just as a matter of detail, to satisfy my curiosity, what were you hoping to find?'

'You know, so why ask me? What were you doing with Hebblethwaite's passport?'

'As a visitor from overseas he had to hand it in when he got to France. When I went to the Antibes to bring him home he wasn't there, so to be ready I collected it for him; and as I had nothing to do I happened to glance at it. What gave you the idea I might be misbehaving myself?'

'You seem damned anxious to know that. I haven't said I was interested in what you were doing.'

'You must have been or you wouldn't have had me followed in France. But let it pass. I'll come to the point. Hebblethwaite hasn't reported back.'

'How do you know?'

'Because he's staying with a friend of mine, one who will see he doesn't get into any more mischief.'

'What you mean is, you've got him locked up somewhere.'

'Well, something like that.'

'And you've got the brass face to come here and admit it?'

'Why not?'

'I've a good mind to arrest you here and now.'

Canson sneered. 'You know better than that. I know what you can do and what you can't do. You can't keep me here without making a charge. What will it be?'

'Abduction.'

'And just how are you going to prove it? You can't, and you know it. But let's not waste time arguing about that. You arrest me and it's likely to be too bad for Hebblethwaite. I take it you want to see him again?'

'It'll be too bad for you if I don't.'

'All right. Let's understand each other. I have a proposition to make. This is it. You give me your solemn oath that you won't poke your nose any farther into my business, either now or in the future, and I'll undertake to see that your young friend is returned to you, A1 and fit for full flying duties, before midnight. That's fair enough. It'll save us both trouble. Call it a gentleman's agreement. Is it a deal?'

Biggles stared at Canson stonily. 'So you've still got the damned impudence to call yourself a gentleman.'

Canson flushed slightly. 'Why not?'

'A man who fakes the mess bills of his brother officers to pay his own isn't my idea of a gentleman.'

'So you've still got that stuck in your gizzard. Well, I'm not concerned with your opinions. I repeat, is it a deal?'

'I don't make deals with people like you.'

'You realize what that means?'

'What does it mean?'

‘It means you’re forcing me to take drastic action. You won’t see Hebblethwaite again. It’s as simple as that. I’ve got a good job and I intend to keep it. Neither I, nor the people for whom I work, are prepared to have our organization upset by you, or anyone else, because you’ve got a bee in your bonnet over something that happened years ago. Purely on that account you assume I’m doing something illegal.’

‘Aren’t you?’ inquired Biggles blandly.

‘You try to prove it.’

Biggles went on evenly: ‘In the presence of a witness you’ve threatened to murder a police officer.’

‘What are you talking about? I didn’t say anything about murder.’

‘Then what were you saying?’

‘There might be an accident,’

‘Such as?’

‘Hebblethwaite might fall out of an aircraft crossing the Channel. That, as you know, has happened before today. It can be proved that he booked an air trip to France and later asked to be flown home to see a sick relation. The Sunnitours office will swear to that. We do our utmost to take care of our passengers but accidents will happen. If people do silly things, such as opening a door when the aircraft is in flight, that’s their funeral.’

Biggles remained unruffled. ‘You’re a worse scoundrel than I took you for, and that’s saying something.’ He reached for a cigarette from the box on the desk.

‘Thanks, I’ll have one of those,’ said Canson.

‘You will not.’ Biggles closed the box. He went on: ‘I find myself wondering how far these friends of yours, as you call them, would trust you, if they knew as much I about you as I do.’

‘Never mind what they think. I’m doing the talking now,’ retorted Canson, showing signs of anger.

‘I think you’ve said enough.’

‘Then you’re not going to play!’

‘Not with you. And if that’s all, if you don’t mind I’ll get on with my work.’ Biggles touched a bell push.

‘That’s your last word?’ growled Canson.

‘It is.’

‘All right, if that’s how you want it. But you’d better think it over. And you needn’t bother to have me followed. I’m going home. I have a flat not far away from here. This is the address.’ Canson tossed a card on the desk. ‘My phone number is on it. If you have second thoughts about my proposition you have only to give me a ring.’

‘I wouldn’t count on that so don’t wait in,’ returned Biggles coldly.

The constable entered. ‘Show this gentleman out,’ said Biggles, with slight emphasis on the word ‘gentleman’.

Canson went without another word.

As the door closed behind him Bertie burst out: 'Well of all the infernal audacity!'

'Take it easy.'

'That rascal must have a hide like a rhino, coming here with such a proposition.'

'He must be worried, for all his high and mighty attitude, or he wouldn't have come here at all. He was on safe ground and he knew it. We shall need more concrete evidence than we have at present before we can charge him with anything. But we'll get it, don't worry. He, and the gang he's working with, are rattled. They know we're suspicious, and someone has had the bright idea of using Ginger as a hostage to stall us off. I'm pretty sure that so far, at any rate, not knowing how much we know they'll think twice before they resort to deliberate murder.'

'What about this talk of fixing an accident?'

'Bluff.'

'Then you don't think Ginger is in danger?'

'I didn't say that. Of course he's in danger. But I'm talking of the present situation.' Biggles shrugged. 'How far these people will go if they get really desperate remains to be seen. Then, of course, they might do anything. Meantime, they've got Ginger. They know we know that. Not being fools they must realize that if he disappears we shan't rest till we've brought them to book.'

'But what are we going to do, old boy?' Bertie was deadly serious.

'Tackle them from the angle where we have the edge on them.'

'Meaning what, exactly?'

'Through the house you tracked Canson to at Millham. They don't know we know about that. I say *they* because it's obvious that Canson isn't working on his own. I'm prepared to gamble on Ginger being in that house. Where else could he be? Dash it all, they can't have many establishments. I'm going to see inside this place at Millham.'

'How are you going to get in?'

'Break in.'

Bertie looked startled. 'But here, I say, old boy, you can't—'

'Never mind what I can't do. If Ginger is in that house I'm going to get him out before I do anything else.'

'When?'

'Tonight. There's nothing to be gained by delay.'

'You're serious about this?'

'I was never more serious.'

'Are you going to tell the Air Commodore what you have in mind?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because he'll forbid me to do it. That would knock out my middle stump. As I don't break orders I should have to abide by his decision. This is a case

where I keep my mouth shut.'

'You're taking one hell of a risk.'

'Of what?'

'Well — er — of getting fired. When the Air Commodore hears what you've done he'll blow his top.'

'I can't help that. I hope he'll never know.'

'What a headline for the newspapers if the house turns out to belong to an innocent party. Police turn housebreakers, and all that sort of thing. They'd be out for your blood.'

'I'd resign, anyway, if Ginger lost his life. I sent him on the job. Now stop quibbling. I've made up my mind. You stay out of this if you don't like it.'

Bertie looked hurt. 'Here, I say old boy, that's a bit thick. You know me better than that. Where you go I go. So we're going to do a spot of house-bashing; that's if you don't change your mind and apply for a search warrant.'

'It's no use. We'll never get one on the grounds we have to offer. It would take too long, anyway. Suppose we did get one. It would mean going to the front door to serve it. We might as well ring up Canson and warn him. No. Complete surprise is our best bet. If we knew for certain that Ginger was in the house it would be a different matter; but we're not.'

'Okay. You know best. You're not forgetting the dogs?'

'I am not.'

'If they're allowed to wander about loose in daylight they'll certainly be on the job after dark.'

'I hope they are. Then they can be dealt with.'

'By whom?'

'You.'

Bertie looked shocked. 'You're not going to ask me to knock them off?'

'Don't be silly. What do you take me for? But let's get on with it. We haven't too much time. For a start I want you to slip out, find a shop where they sell meat and buy a couple of pounds of liver.'

'Did you say *liver*?'

'I did.'

'What sort of liver?'

'Any sort — pigs, sheep, cows, chickens — I don't care.'

'What the devil do you want liver for?'

'The dogs. Dogs love liver.'

'But wait a minute. You can't poison—'

'I haven't said anything about poison. If you can think of any way of getting through a barrage of Alsations without a sound I'd be happy to consider it. I know of only one way. Putting it nicely, call it a tranquillizer. I call it dope. While you're out I shall go down to the lab. and ask them to let me have something guaranteed to put a pack of hounds to sleep for a couple of hours or so. I'll take their advice on it. They should know.'

'How are you going to feed this stuff to the bow-wows?'

‘That’s the job I have for you.’

‘Here, now, wait a minute. I’m not—’

Biggles raised a hand. ‘It’s all right. Don’t get in a flap. They won’t have a chance to bite you. All you have to do is glide over low, low enough to make sure you don’t miss the target but not too low, and scatter the bait on the big lawn in front of the house. You’ll do this after dark, of course. If the dogs are about they’ll soon wind it. You needn’t come back. Fly on and land on the aerodrome. Canson has no night-flying facilities so everyone should have gone home long before you get there. Canson will be in his flat here in London. I shall go down by car to the airfield and pick you up. Put gun in your pocket. You may need it before the night’s out.’

‘Sounds like you’re going the whole hog.’

‘I’m prepared to, if necessary. We don’t know what we may have to face in that house. It may be a den of thieves. With bare hands we’d get the worst of the argument.’

‘This sounds like going flat out for trouble.’

‘In for a penny in for a pound, as they say. Ginger will be relying on us to get him out and I’m not going to let him down. I’ve always been prepared for one of us to go west by accident; that’s on the cards; but Canson’s hint of murder has got me savage, and I’m taking no risks of that while I’m on my feet.’

‘Absolutely. I’m with you.’

‘Fine. Then we understand each other.’

‘Have you made a definite plan?’

‘Not definite, but I know what I aim to do, which is get inside that house. Just how that’s to be done will depend upon circumstances, what we find when we get there. It won’t be easy. People who take the precaution of laying on a pack of guard dogs aren’t likely to leave the doors and windows open. I’ll talk to you more about it when I meet you on the airfield. You press on and get the liver. I’ll go to the lab. and get the dope.’

Bertie departed on his errand. It took him a little while to find what he wanted, and when he returned with his parcel it was to see Biggles’ desk spread with old newspapers. On them lay a knife, some phials, and an open case containing a hypodermic syringe.

‘Here’s your meat,’ said Bertie, putting his package on the papers. ‘The stuff’s pretty bloody. I call this a disgusting business. I like my liver cooked.’

Biggles unwrapped a gory-looking mess. Without a word he sliced the liver into fairly small pieces. This done he injected each piece with a dose from the phials.

He then wrapped the lot up in a clean sheet of paper and handed it to Bertie.

‘Here’s the gubbins,’ he said. ‘You know what you have to do with it. Don’t hang about near the house, but don’t miss the mark or the dogs may end up by smacking their lips over *our* livers. Don’t make more noise than you

have to. That's all. See you later. I can't say exactly when I shall get to the airfield. You'll have to wait for me.'

'Right you are, old boy. I'll be pressing on.'

Bertie went out.

# CHAPTER 11

## DARK WORK

As soon as Bertie had gone Biggles washed the stains of the liver from his hand and on the intercom. telephone put a call through to the office of Detective Chief Inspector Gaskin, CID, with whom he so often co-operated. Having made contact with him he asked if he could spare the time to come to his office for a few minutes.

Presently the detective's burly figure filled the door way. When he saw the blood-stained newspaper still lying on Biggles' desk he took his pipe from his mouth long enough to ask: 'Where's the body?'

'There isn't any body — yet,' answered Biggles. 'This gore isn't human. It came from a beast of some sort. It doesn't matter. Sit down.'

Gaskin sat, knocked out his pipe in Biggles' ash-tray and refilled it with tobacco from a well-worn pouch. 'What's on your mind?'

'Plenty,' Biggles told him. 'I've lost Ginger.'

'Oh, and how did that happen?'

'I sent him out to tail a suspect. Something must have gone wrong. He's now in the hands of a gang who have threatened to murder him if I don't lay off.'

'What are you going to do about it?'

'Get him back.'

'How?'

'That's why I asked you to come here. I need your help. Could you find me an efficient housebreaker for a few hours, one who can be relied on to keep his mouth shut?'

Gaskin, always imperturbable, showed no surprise. 'Since when did you decide to start cracking cribs?'

'Tonight.'

'Bit unorthodox, isn't it?'

'I've no alternative.'

'Looks to me as if you're dead set for trouble in a big way. You get copped house-breaking and they'll tear your hide off.'

'Can't help it. They're welcome to my hide if they want it.'

'What's the idea?'

'I've muscled into what may turn out to be a big thing. So far I haven't been able to get the details; but the point is, the gang have got hold of Ginger and are holding him as a hostage. Either I pack up or they've threatened to throw him out of an aircraft into the Channel.'

'Could they do that?'

'Quite easily. They have aircraft. It would look like an accident and I couldn't prove it wasn't. As I don't want that to happen, before I deal with

these swine I've got to get Ginger out of their hands.'

'Do you know where he is?'

'I think so. I have reason to think he's in a big house in Suffolk, not far from the private aerodrome these crooks are using.'

'Then all you have to do is trot along with a search warrant.'

Biggles shook his head. 'No use, for several reasons, one of which is I haven't a shred of evidence against the man who owns the house. I don't even know his name. I only *think* Ginger is inside. I don't know it for certain.'

'So you're going in to see?'

'What else can I do? If I take another step against this gang I may be sending Ginger to his death. They may be bluffing, but I daren't risk it. There are guard dog Alsatians, round the house, but Bertie has gone on ahead to drop from the air a lot of doped meat which I hope will put them to sleep for a while. Then I break into the house. Not having had much experience at this sort of thing, and not having the right tools for the job I've decided to take a professional with me — if I find one. I thought you might know one. How about it?'

Gaskin exhaled a cloud of blue smoke. 'I suppose you know what you're doing? You get caught at this there'll be hell to pay.'

'I'm perfectly well aware of it. Hell can burn the roof off the Yard for all I care as long as I get Ginger back.'

'Okay, if that's how you feel about it.'

'Well, do you know anyone, not behind bars at moment, who for a consideration would undertake get me inside this house. He needn't come in with me. As soon as I'm inside he can hoof it.'

'Are you reckoning on making an arrest?'

'No. Anyhow, that isn't in my programme. I haven't a clue as to what I may find, and I don't particularly care. I'm simply concerned with getting Ginger. The rest can wait.'

Gaskin thought for a minute. 'I think I know the man for you if I can get hold of him at such short notice. He's going straight now — or so he tells me, although I wouldn't care to bet on it. He's a quick-witted little cockney known in the business as Badger.'

'His name doesn't matter.'

'All right. I'll see what I can do. How long can you give me?'

'At a stretch, a couple of hours.'

Gaskin looked at his watch. 'Eight o'clock. He should be in the Red Lion. It's his usual time for a snifter. I'll send someone along to fetch him. He'll come if he knows it's for me.' The detective hesitated. 'How are you getting to this place?'

'By car.'

'Would you like me to come along with you?'

Biggles' eyes opened wide. 'That's mighty kind of you but I can't drag you in.'



‘Nobody drags me anywhere. You may need help.’

‘That’s more than likely, but I’m not letting you risk your pension on my account. No, thank you.’

‘I was only reckoning on standing by, as a witness, say, in case anything went wrong. Someone ought to know where you are in case you don’t come back. What’s the name of this house?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Stiffen the crows! You’re taking on something without knowing much about it.’

‘I know where the house is and that’s enough for me.’

Gaskin got up. ‘Well, think about it. I’ll see what I can do. I’ll be back.’ He left the room.

Biggles waited, killing time by again studying the photographs until he had memorized the premises from all angles.

It was an hour before Gaskin came back. With him he brought a pale, undersized, seedy-looking individual with nervous, restless eyes.

‘This is Badger, the man I told you about,’ announced Gaskin.

‘Have you told him what’s afoot?’

‘I’ve given him a rough idea but you’d better tell him yourself.’

Biggles looked at his proposed accomplice. ‘A couple of hours out of town there’s a big country house. I have photos of it here. You can see them. Inside the house is one of my assistants, a police officer. If I don’t soon get him out he’s liable to be murdered. I’ve been warned that may happen. Who occupies the house, and how many people there are in it, I haven’t the remotest idea; so I’m not denying there may be risks. My plan is, I shall take you to the house. All you have to do is get me inside. Having done that you’ll be free to do what you like. You can go home or you can wait for me to bring you back to town. The job’s worth fifty pounds. I don’t know how long it will take; maybe minutes, maybe an hour. Whatever happens I’ll see that no blame attaches to you. I’m prepared to swear you were acting under my orders. Is that all clear?’

‘Clear as daylight, guv’nor.’

‘Any questions you’d like to ask?’

‘No.’

‘Very well. How about it?’

Badger turned his head to look at Gaskin. ‘You tell ‘im what I told you. Chief.’

To Biggles, Gaskin said apologetically: ‘He’s being awkward. He’s not happy about it.’

‘Why not? Isn’t the money enough?’

‘It isn’t the nicker. He says he doesn’t know you, and he’s a bit cagey about working for people he doesn’t know.’ Gaskin smiled whimsically. ‘He trusts me; trusts me like a father. He says he’ll do it if I come along to see he’s kept in the clear if the thing boils over. Naturally, he’s a bit sensitive about his past record.’

Biggles looked uneasy. 'You put me on a spot. It's up to you. It'd suit me to have you with us in case I needed a witness to confirm the reason—'

'Then say no more about it. You've helped me more than once so I owe you—'

'You don't owe me anything.'

'All right, all right; keep your hair on. When do we start?'

'The sooner the better. Does that suit you. Badger?'

Badger nodded. 'Just one thing, guv. How about dawgs?'

'You don't like dogs?'

'It ain't that. Dawgs don't like me.'

'There are some dogs,' admitted Biggles. 'But by the time we get there I hope they'll be in no state to express what they think about strangers. A friend of mine has gone on ahead to distribute some doped liver.'

'That's what I like to hear.' A slow smile softened the ex-burglar's face. 'Excuse me, but it comes to something when the bogies themselves take me out to do a job. I shall remember tonight, and not 'arf.'

'I hope you'll forget it,' replied Biggles. 'It shouldn't be necessary for me to tell you that I'm acting without authority. The only reason I'm doing it is in the hope of preventing a murder faked to look like an accident. Now, is there anything else before we start?'

'I'd like to 'ave a squint at them photos.'

'Here you are.' Biggles spread them over the desk. Badger scrutinized them with a critical eye. 'You say you ain't never bin inside this joint, guv?'

'I have yet to see it from the outside.'

'That don't make it no easier but I reckon I shall manage. Okay, guv. That's enough.' Badger swept the prints into a heap.

Biggles put them back in the drawer. 'Right. Then we might as well move off. Where are your tools?' Badger unbuttoned and opened his jacket to reveal a waistcoat with numerous pockets, some of queer shape, some bulging. From the tops of one or two projected the handles of tools. 'This is my working outfit,' he stated with a hint of pride. 'The Chief 'ere knows all abart 'em.'

'Your equipment doesn't include a gun?' queried Biggles.

Badger looked horrified. 'Gun! Me! Not on your nelly. When I'm copped I come quiet. The Chief'll tell you that.'

'That's right,' confirmed Gaskin.

'Let's get along,' said Biggles, 'We've some way to go. My car's outside.'

Two minutes later they were on their way.

The journey was uneventful, and with little traffic on the roads at such a late hour the car made good time, arriving at the airfield a little before midnight. Bertie was there. He must have heard the car coming, because when it ran to a stop at the end of the road he appeared out of the darkness; or, rather, into the moonlight, since the sky was clear and the moon well up.

'You've been a long time. I thought you were never coming,' he complained.

‘I had things to do.’

‘I see you’ve brought the Chief-Inspector along. What-cheer, Inspector.’

‘He offered to give us a hand — and will probably regret it. He also found a craftsman to help us. Meet Badger, who once made a speciality of getting in and out of other people’s houses. Where’s the machine?’

‘I parked it by the hedge about a hundred yards on. I thought I’d better not leave it too close to the buildings in case anyone came along. There’s no one here. Everything’s locked up.’

‘Good. How did you get on?’

‘All right, I think. I glided over as low as I dare. The last I saw of my disgusting cargo it looked like making a direct hit on the lawn.’

‘What time was this?’

‘Ten o’clock. That should give the bow-wows time to find the stuff, get it inside them and give it a chance to work.’

‘Did you see them?’

‘No. The moon was still low and much of the lawn was in shadow.’

‘Did you see anything at all of interest?’

‘No. There were lights on in the house, most on the ground floor but I noticed one upstairs. I got an impression that some lights on the ground floor, close together, came from one big room.’

‘We’ll have a look at them from ground level. You’d better drive, Bertie. You know where we’re going.’

They all got into the car, Bertie at the wheel. He drove slowly through the village which, as was to be expected at midnight, was mostly in darkness, and, cruising on quietly, soon afterwards allowed the car to come to rest tight into a broad grass verge, with a hedge on the far side and a belt of fir trees beyond.

‘We’re alongside the property,’ he said. ‘The entrance to the drive is where the trees end about twenty yards on.’

Still sitting in the car Biggles said: ‘I think the best thing for you, Inspector, would be to stay here in the car in case someone should come and wonder what it’s doing. The village constable would, if this turned out to be on his beat. We’ll run it on the grass. Then we can switch off the lights. With everything quiet you should hear if we run into trouble.’

‘As you say. It’s your show.’

The others got out. ‘Let’s have a look at the house,’ said Biggles. ‘Badger, you keep close to me. Bertie, you act rear-guard — not too close but keep in touch.’

‘Right.’

‘We’ll take the easy way in. No need to poke our eyes out trying to push through these trees in the dark.’

They walked on to the drive entrance. There was a gate. It was shut, but not locked. They went in, closing it behind them, and moved on, turning half right to get into black shadow of the conifers. The house stood the best part of a hundred yards away but already the lights were in full view. A series close

together at the end of the left wing supported Bertie's belief that it was one big room. Light came from a window on the first floor and a glim over the front door suggested a lighted entrance hall.

It was a fine summer night, warm, moon and starlight, without a movement of air. In a way these conditions were ideal for the work on hand in that any sound of movement near the house would be heard; but they also operated in reverse; any sound made by the approaching party would be heard by anyone, or anything, outside the house; for Biggles was not forgetting the dogs, and was not prepared to take chances with them until it was confirmed that they were out of action.

Making no more noise than shadows the intruders advanced towards the house, always taking advantage of the cover offered by the trees, some isolated specimens, others clustered in small groups. Badger kept at Biggles' heels; Bertie tracked them at a distance of ten or twelve yards. In this order they drew near the objective.

Under the low, spreading arms of a fine old cedar on the very edge of the lawn. Biggles stopped, his eyes making a thorough reconnaissance of the scene. The lawn, rectangular in shape, perhaps half an acre of it covering the full frontage of the house, lay bathed in moonlight. A single object was conspicuous. It was a small hump. It lay near the border of a flower-bed on the side by which they were approaching. It did not move. It was impossible to say what it was. It might have been a pile of dead leaves swept together by a gardener. It could have been a heap of earth.

Biggles brought Badger forward and pointed. 'What do you make of that?'

Badger stared. 'Looks to me like it might be a flamin' dawg.'

That was what Biggles was thinking.

His eyes were still focused on the object when Badger's fingers closed on his arm like a vice, and he breathed hoarsely: 'My gawd! Look what's coming.'

From round the end of the house had appeared what was undoubtedly a dog. An Alsatian. It walked slowly, often stopping to sniff the ground.

Badger would have bolted had not Biggles held him. 'Stand still, you fool,' he hissed.

## CHAPTER 12

### THE RAID

BIGGLES spoke without taking his eyes off the animal. It was evident that it had not seen them, or suspected they were there, for it was still walking on, more and more slowly, hardly more than a step at a time. Once it appeared to stumble. In this way it wandered on until it reached the original object that had attracted Biggles' attention. It smelt it. Then it sat on its haunches beside it. It raised its chin and yawned.

A minute passed. Two minutes. Biggles stood frozen rigid. Beside him Badger was breathing fast.

Then the dog lay down.



Biggles pulled Badger closer to him and whispered: 'I think it's had its medicine. Keep still.' But he remained motionless for a full five minutes before he took a cautious pace forward. Nothing happened. He took another. Slowly they edged nearer. This could not be avoided because the dog, or

two dogs as it presently transpired, lay directly between them and the house. They made as wide a detour as was possible, but it was curtailed by a brick wall, which Biggles knew from the photographs was the boundary of a walled vegetable garden. As they reached the nearest point, still with his eyes on the danger. Biggles took out his automatic pistol. The two dogs, lying stretched out on the grass, could now be plainly seen. They did not move.

‘They’re asleep,’ he breathed, putting the gun back in his pocket.

‘I ‘ope to gawd they stay asleep,’ growled Badger. ‘You didn’t tell me you’d brought that thing.’

‘What thing?’

‘That gun. I’d never ‘ave come if I’d a known. I bar shooting, always ‘ave.’

‘Don’t worry. It was only in case of emergency. You may not mind taking on Alsations with your fists, but I do. This is no time to argue about it.’

‘How many of these flamin’ dawgs are there?’

‘I don’t know for sure. About six, I think.’

‘Cor, blimey! Where are the rest?’

Biggles had to admit he didn’t know. To comfort his nervous assistant all he could say was: ‘Wherever they are they should be out for the count. Dogs keep together, so if these two found the dope the others should have had a share.’

‘I don’t like dawgs,’ muttered Badger. ‘Anything else I don’t mind: but not dawgs when they’re this size.’

‘Forget it.’

‘I wish I could, guv’nor.’

‘Let’s press on.’

Taking infinite care, eyes and ears alert, they crossed a flower-bed and did not stop again until they were hard against the wall of the house.

‘I’m out o’ practice, that’s my trouble,’ murmured Badger, mopping a sweating forehead with his sleeve.

‘This is where you get some,’ returned Biggles cheerfully, beckoning Bertie to come forward.

‘This is it,’ he said, when they were all together. ‘Now, Badger, this is where you find what you think is the best place to get us inside. Once you’ve done that you can go back to the car. What would you do if you were on your own?’

‘If I was on me own the first thing I’d do would be to see who’s in that end room with the lights on. It’s always a good thing to know who’s abart.’

‘That’s a sound idea,’ agreed Biggles. ‘You two wait here while I slip along to see what goes on. From the strength of light I don’t think blinds or curtains can have been drawn. Badger, instead of standing still, wasting time, you might explore the possibilities of getting in somewhere at this end. I shall come back here. Bertie, I’ll leave you to take care of Badger. Keep your eyes open for a dog that may still be on its feet. Shan’t be long.’

Keeping as close as possible to the wall of the house Biggles made his way as quickly as circumstances allowed to the far end of the mansion, passing the steps leading up to the front door on the way. As he drew near the first lighted window a faint murmur of voices told him there were at least two people in the room. The windows were closed so the sound was muffled, and although he paused to listen he could not catch the words. A final step revealed there were curtains; but they were of a light material and had been carelessly drawn, leaving gaps between them. Leaning forward he looked between the nearest into the room.

He had no idea whatever of what he might see and he hadn't wasted time on futile speculation. He was prepared for almost anything — except for what he saw. It was this. Between two men, who had their backs towards him, stood Ginger.

When Biggles had recovered from the shock, which did not take long, his eyes explored the room. A glance showed that it was large and expensively furnished; but in this he was not interested. His eyes came to rest on one side of the fireplace. Seated in an arm-chair facing the others in the room, a glass in his hand and a bottle on a small table beside him, was a man dressed in a black dressing-gown. He wore a black mask. He was talking as if in argument, using a hand in the continental manner to emphasize what he was saying. The other hand rested on the handle of a black cane.





Biggles would have liked to hear what the conversation was about, but this was denied him. He could judge the situation pretty well. Ginger was being questioned and the two men beside him were guards. Who these two men were was unimportant. The great thing was, Ginger was there, and he

appeared to be in good shape. This was as much as Biggles really wanted to know.

Withdrawing, he hurried back to where he had left the others. He found Bertie alone. 'Seen any dogs?' he asked tersely.

'No.'

'Where's Badger?'

'Working on a window. The kitchen, he thinks. There are bars, but he says they're soft iron and he has a tool that'll cut through 'em like butter. He'll have a couple of 'em out in five minutes.'

'I hope he's right because we've no time to lose. I've seen Ginger.'

'Where?'

'He's in the end room; being questioned I imagine. There are three men with him. This is our chance to get him, while we know where he is. He may not be there long. If he's moved we'd have to search the whole house for him. Take me to Badger.'

'This way.'

Half a dozen steps and they came to Badger working on a ground floor window at waist level. Actually, the room inside turned out to be what is known as semi-basement.

'How's it going?' asked Biggles.

'Shan't be a tick. Do you know if they 'ave any burglar alarms?'

'I have no idea.'

'Then it looks as if you'll have to chance 'em.'

There was a brittle *snick* as metal bit through metal. 'That's it,' said Badger, removing the second bar and thrusting it into some nearby shrubs. 'Is that 'ole big enough for you? I can easy cut out another.'

'Plenty big enough.'

'You know how to slide through? Feet first, never head first.'

'Okay. Now you've done your job you can go back to the car. We can manage now.'

'I'd better make sure o' that.'

'How?'

Badger produced a torch and directed the beam inside the room. 'Like I thought,' he said. 'The kitchen. You'd look silly if you got in, after I'd gone, and found someone had locked the kitchen door.'

'I didn't think of that.'

'In this business you 'ave to think of everything. I'd better make sure.'

Badger slid through the aperture he had made and disappeared. In seconds he was back. 'All clear,' he reported. 'I've opened the door. The key's on the inside. There's a long corridor the other side. I'll give you a tip. Put the key in your pocket. Then, if you run into trouble and come back this way you can lock the door behind you.'

'I'll do that. Now you get back to the car. Tell the Inspector Ginger is inside. I've seen him. We're going in after him. I'll be back as soon as I can.'

That's all.'

'I get it,' said Badger, and faded away into the dark shadows.

'Let's go.' Biggles, torch in hand, went through the window. Bertie followed. They went straight to the door. Biggles opened it, took out the key and put it in his pocket. He looked into the corridor. 'All clear.' Leaving the door open behind them, together they walked on in the direction that would bring them to the far end of the house.

A short flight of stairs took them to the level of the ground floor rooms. A door covered with green baize filled the passage; but it was only a swing door to cut off the staff rooms and they went on, presently to arrive in the hall, a large entrance hall with the front door on the left. It was lighted by a hanging chandelier.

Torches, no longer needed, were put away. Biggles pointed to a door on the far side of the hall. 'That must be the room where I saw Ginger. Listen.'

They stood still. From the far side of the door came a murmur of voices. 'Good,' breathed Biggles. 'It sounds as if he's still there. This is it.' He took out his gun.

'What are you going to do?'

'The only thing we can do. Open the door, walk in and demand Ginger. You back me up. Quick work and bluff, before they realize what's happening, should do the trick. Ready?'

'All set.' Bertie took out his gun.

'Keep close.'

Biggles crossed the hall to the door. He took the handle. Slowly and quietly he turned it. The door yielded to his pressure. He pushed it open and strode forward a few steps. The position was exactly as when he had last seen it.

'Don't move, anybody,' he rapped out. 'Anyone who moves will be asking for trouble. Come on, Ginger. I want you.'

The man wearing a mask was the first to recover from what must have been no ordinary shock. At all events, he was the first to speak. His expression did not change.

'Just a moment,' he said calmly. 'Indiscriminate haste is quite unnecessary. Would I be right in thinking you are Inspector Bigglesworth?'

Whatever surprise Biggles felt at his name being known he did not show it. 'You might and you might not,' he answered stiffly.

'I'd like a few words with you,'

'Some other time. At the moment I'm in a hurry.'

'It could be to your advantage.'

'We'll discuss things later.'

'You're giving yourself unnecessary trouble, I do assure you,' said the man in black, showing no emotion. 'Please put that pistol away. As a police officer you would hardly dare to use it, and it does not impress me. You have my word for it there will be no violence on my part.'

Biggles did not answer.

Without hindrance Ginger had already moved to a position behind Bertie, who had followed Biggles into the room. No one else had moved. It seemed that with the pistol covering them no one was anxious to be the first to take a chance.

Biggles went on, quietly, but with iron in his voice: 'If you are wise you will all stay here. If anyone gets hurt it will be his own fault.'

No one spoke. No one moved.

Biggles backed to the door. He waited while the others went through, followed them and closed the door behind him.

'Keep going, Bertie,' he said tersely. 'You know the way. I'll watch the rear.'

The retreat was continued swiftly and without a word until the kitchen was reached, when Biggles said: 'Make it snappy. They may try to cut us off from outside.' Taking Badger's tip he locked the kitchen door behind them. Another minute and they were together outside the house.

'Make for the car,' ordered Biggles. 'Keep close to the trees. Watch for dogs. Take it steady.'

As they crossed the end of the lawn a dog appeared, but it wandered about aimlessly and to everyone's relief took no notice of them. There was no sight or sound of pursuit.

'I think they've taken your advice, old boy,' said Bertie.

Apparently Biggles was not so sure of it, for he merely answered: 'Keep going.'

When they were half-way to the road there was an unexpected development. A car with blazing headlights turned into the drive and raced on to the house. They paused to watch it.

'That's a Rolls,' observed Bertie. 'It's either Canson's car or one like it.'

'He's arrived at a good moment,' returned Biggles cynically. 'They can now all put their heads together to work out how we knew about the house, and how we got in.'

They watched the car stop at the front door. A man got out, but he was too far away for recognition. The front door was opened to let him in.

They went on and without trouble reached the car, on the verge where they had left it. Gaskin was standing by the bonnet. Badger was inside.

'Well, how did it go?' questioned Gaskin.

'Easy. No bother at all. In fact, I have a feeling it was *too* easy. It will surprise you to know we got quite a civil reception, so civil that looking back I can't help thinking there was something phony about it. I expected something very different.'

'No shooting?'

'It wasn't necessary.'

'Thank God for that. We're on thin ice as it is. This is no sort of a lark for respectable police officers. Are you sure they didn't come after you?'

'If they did we saw nothing of them. We've got what we came for so let's

forget it.'

'I was a bit worried when a car went past at a hell of a lick a few minutes ago. I thought it turned into the drive.'

'It did. It must have been Canson. They let him in. Did he see you here?'

'I dunno. If he did he didn't stop.'

'If he did notice the car, when the people in the house tell him what has happened he'll guess what it was doing here. We'd better get on. He may come back.'

'I can tell you this,' put in Ginger. 'Canson carries a gun.'

'All right. Let's go. Bertie, you drive. Take us back the airfield. You know the way.'

When the car was moving Gaskin said: 'I still don't know what all this is about.'

'If it comes to that, neither do I,' confessed Biggles. 'I'm hoping Ginger will be able to help us.'

'I'm afraid I can't help you, either,' put in Ginger. 'Something big is going on, that's fairly obvious, but still haven't a clue as to what is being transported between this country and the Continent, or vice versa.'

'How about picking up one of the gang and him talk?' suggested Gaskin.

'I've got to get more evidence before I can do any picking up. You seem to be all right, Ginger. How did they treat you?'

'Very well. Surprisingly well. I've no complaints about that. I can only imagine it was because they wanted to know something and thought I could tell 'em. They were putting on the pressure when you walked in. The head man, whom I judge to be the chap in the mask since he did all the questioning, had just had a phone call; from Canson, I suspect. I don't know what he said, but I think he must have passed on a piece of important information. Maybe that's how the boss knew your name. I didn't tell him. Anyhow, it seemed to upset him.'

'Canson had found out you were in the Force.'

'How do you know?'

'He told us so.'

'Told you?'

'Yes. He had the impudence to come to the Yard with a proposition. We didn't bite. That may have been what he reported. It was about you. That was what decided me to get you out of that house right away. But never mind about that now. I'll tell you about it later.'

The car had arrived at the airfield and was slowing down as if to stop; but Biggles said: 'Carry on, Bertie. Right up to the machine... that's it. Now switch off all lights.'

Bertie seemed surprised. 'Are we staying here?'

'For a while.'

'What's the idea?' inquired Gaskin, 'We've got what we came for.'

'Not everything,' replied Biggles, 'I'm looking at it like this. At the house

we've just tossed a hammer in the gears. What will they do about it? Anything could happen.'

'We're not likely to learn much sitting here.'

'We might learn a lot.'

'How?'

'The gang must be wondering how much we know. They know we know about the house. That must have been a bone-shaker for them. Their problem at this moment must be whether to hang on and bluff it out or get clear while the going's good. If they decided to pull out they may go by air. They have two machines in the hangar. It would be a great help towards our next move if we knew they were left there. That's why, as we're in no great hurry, I suggest we sit here for a bit to see what happens. We've plenty to talk about. I want Ginger to tell me what happened to him.'

Gaskin spoke. 'I'd say what they're doing right now is hiding or getting rid of anything that might be incriminating. They must be reckoning it won't be long before the police arrive.'

'Let's watch what happens. We can't be seen from the hangar. We'll get away before daylight in any case. Go ahead, Ginger and tell us how you got in such a mess. You can take your time.'

# CHAPTER 13

## NOW WHAT?

GINGER told his story, step by step, from the time he had left the Sunnitours office in London. No one interrupted.

When he had finished Biggles asked: 'Do you know how Canson got wise to what you were doing?'

'No. Not specifically. I've thought a lot about this. It may have been a number of small things that aroused his suspicions. Naturally he'd be on the alert. Whatever happened it must have been after we landed in France. He may have noticed at Nice airport that I didn't go to Antibes with the rest of the party. Later he may have seen me on the terrace of the hotel. I had to wait there for him to come out. Maybe it was the English money I gave to the old woman outside the shop in the Rue Baldini. She saw me try to see through the window. She knew I'd arrived just after Canson. He was still inside. From the way she behaved when I was attacked I'm sure she's one of the gang — a sort of watchdog. She may have gone in and told Canson an Englishman had followed him. In the morning someone found the button off my sleeve. It must have been sent along to Canson at his hotel. When he came to fetch me at the hostel I wasn't there. The driver of the bus may have told him I'd stayed in Nice and didn't get back until late. He had a look at my passport. I had to leave it for the police to check.'

'What else could the people at the hostel have told him?'

'Well, in the struggle in the Rue Baldini a knife ripped up my sleeve. They knew about that although I didn't tell 'em how it happened. They mended it for me. I slipped into Nice early to see if the Dove was still there. When I got back Canson was already suspicious. I knew that from the questions he asked me. He must have noticed the button missing from my cuff but he didn't mention that until later. He'd got my passport. He said it was to make sure I didn't forget it. That was nonsense. He hung on to it because he knew I couldn't leave without it. By that time I'd realized that things were going to be difficult; but I wasn't particularly worried; I thought I was safe in going back with him to England, assuming I'd be able to leave him if I felt like it when we landed at a Customs airport. But he saw that didn't happen. He came straight here.'

'You mean — he flew here non-stop from Nice?'

'He did. At first I thought the reason for that was because he wasn't giving me a chance to speak to anyone; but, of course, it may have been because he was carrying contraband.'

'Are you sure of that?'

'No.'

'Then why do you think he was carrying contraband?'

‘It’s really no more than a hunch. But there was one small incident that made me think. When we got to the plane at Nice airport, Rawlings — I told you he was co-pilot and how I knew his name — came out of the cabin with a screwdriver in his hand. I might not have noticed it if he hadn’t looked a bit embarrassed and tried to hide it. All the way home I was trying to work out what he could have been doing in the cabin with a screwdriver.’

‘Weren’t there any screws?’

‘Yes, but it took me some time to find ‘em.’

‘Where were they?’

‘The backs of the two front passenger seats had been screwed on; but the heads of the screws were hidden by an overlap of material, some sort of fabric, so that unless you were looking for them you wouldn’t find them. None of the other seats were like that. Do you happen to know if those screwed-on backs are standard fittings?’

‘No. But we can soon find out. Of course, the seating might have been damaged at some time and repaired in Canson’s workshop. Did the screws look new?’

‘Yes.’

‘You couldn’t do anything about them?’

‘I’d nothing to unscrew them with, if that’s what you mean. Even with a tool it would have taken some time and Canson may have come aft at any moment to what I was doing. Actually, he did, later on, leaving Rawlings at the stick.’

‘And that’s all you can tell us about the trip?’

‘I think that’s the lot.’

‘Tell me this,’ requested Biggles. ‘The fellow in the mask. Did you ever see his face?’

‘No. I saw him three times and he was always in same chair, dressed the same way.’

‘Did you hear his name mentioned?’

‘No names were mentioned in front of me.’

‘Then you know nothing about him?’

‘No more than you do. But there’s no doubt he’s boss.’

‘Why do you think they kept you?’

‘I’d say there were two reasons. First, they didn’t want me to talk. Even before they knew who I was they weren’t giving me a chance to speak to anyone. I was grabbed the instant we landed. Those two men you saw in the room were waiting in the hangar. We taxied straight in. Canson must have sent a signal to the boss warning him to be ready. The second reason, and this may have been more important, was that they wanted me to talk, to tell them who I represented. They thought I might be working for a newspaper. They were really worried. They realized there had been a leak somewhere and were mighty anxious to know where it was. They knew I could tell them if I could be induced to open my mouth. They tried the velvet glove, first, including



bribes. But when Canson found out who I really was, and told the boss, as I suppose, he got tough. Tonight, when you walked m, it looked like being the showdown. I was told to talk — or else. By the way, how did you—'

'I'll tell you our side of the story later. Did you tell them anything?'

'As a matter of fact I did drop a hint to the boss about Canson's character.'

'Why did you do that?'

'Partly for something to say but chiefly to cause mischief. From the way he reacted I fancy he knew nothing of Canson's Service record.'

'How did you explain you knew about that?'

'I admitted I'd served in the RAF.'

Gaskin broke in. 'Where's all this nattering getting us?'

'Not very far, I'm afraid,' conceded Biggles. 'What in your opinion should be our next move? You have heard how things stand. Would you raid the house?'

Gaskin shook his head. 'They'll be expecting that to happen, so anything there or which may have been there will have disappeared by now — hidden or destroyed. I think you'd better tackle the plane angle. Find out what it's carrying.'

'The same thing applies. Anything it may have had on board when it flew home will have been disposed of. I could grab the plane now, for illegal entry. Ginger would be a witness to that. But it's a minor offence. Canson would get off with a fine and I'd find myself with a dead duck. Another thing. Suppose we were lucky enough to catch Canson with the goods on board. We'd have him in the bag. But unless he squealed, the rest of the gang, including the big boss, would get away. We'd have nothing on them. When I close the bag I want them all in it.'

'I'd grab the plane when it returns from its next flight abroad.'

'If we drew blank we'd have exposed our hand for nothing. That could happen. They've had a fright, so it's reasonable to suppose they'll lay off for a while, whatever it is they're doing. I feel more inclined to give them a bit more rope, hoping they'll take enough to hang themselves. In other words, leave them to make the next move.'

'Well, that's up to you.' Gaskin relit his pipe.

'Another thing I'm up against is this. How far are the Sunnitours people, the employees of the travel agency, involved? Are they in the racket or do they know nothing about what has been going on?'

Ginger spoke. 'I'd say they know nothing. I mean the people in the London office and the couple in charge of the hostel at Antibes. They've struck me all along as being ordinary decent people. I'd say only the flying people at this end, and the toughs in the Rue Baldini, are in the know.'

Biggles nodded. 'I agree with you. The lower employees couldn't tell us anything.' He raised his head m a listening position. 'Wait! Can I hear something?'

'Like what?'

‘A car.’

Silence fell. Ginger opened a door quietly and listened. ‘I can hear a car, and it seems to be somewhere close, but I couldn’t say exactly where it is. I can’t see any lights anywhere.’ A long pause and he went on: ‘I can’t hear it now. It must either have stopped or gone on.’ He got back into his seat leaving the door open.

A minute later, from no great distance away, came a curious, low, rumbling sound.

‘Can I hear distant thunder?’ queried Gaskin.

‘What you heard was the hangar doors being opened,’ corrected Biggles tersely, scrambling out of the car. He stood motionless, staring in the direction of the hangars. The moon had set and consequently visibility was restricted. ‘I could have sworn that noise was made by the hangar doors but I can’t see a light anywhere,’ he muttered. ‘There it is again! It must have been the doors being closed. I’d better have a look to see what goes on. Stand fast. I can do this—’

His voice was drowned as the quiet of the summer night was torn wide open by the roar of aero engines being started. He went off at a run, keeping close to the hedge.

Bertie and Ginger had by now got out of the car. They stood staring into the darkness in which Biggles had disappeared.

‘I doubt if he got there in time to see anything,’ said Ginger presently, as sounds made it evident that an aircraft was taxiing across the field.

‘Sounds like the Dove,’ murmured Bertie. ‘It’s away. There it goes.’

All that could be seen of the machine as it took off was the vague glow of the cockpit.

Within five minutes Biggles was back. ‘That was the Dove,’ he announced shortly. ‘I thought something like this might happen. That’s why I waited.’

‘Did you see anything?’

‘Enough. There were only two people in the machine. One of them we may suppose was Canson, since his Rolls is parked in its usual place beside the hangar. It was his car we heard.’

‘Which means he must be coming back,’ said Ginger.

‘Probably, but not necessarily. He may have arranged for someone to collect the car.’

Gaskin stepped in. ‘It’s my guess that anything incriminating that might have been in the house is now on its way in that plane to some place else. Where do you reckon Canson’s making for?’

‘I may be wrong but I shall bank on Nice. We know the gang has a place there. This is where we have to move fast.’

‘Doing what?’

‘I’m going to follow him in our machine,’ declared Biggles. ‘Ginger, listen carefully. This is what I want you to do. Take the Inspector and Badger back to London. At the Yard, get on the private line to Paris Interpol office. Contact

Marcel. He's not likely to be there at this hour but if he's at home the switchboard operator should be able to put you through to him. If you can't get him first go keep trying. Tell him that the suspect Dove may be on its way to Nice. Ask him to have someone at the airport to check if it arrives. If it does, tail the people in it. He can do that by phone long before the Dove gets there. He's already got a man watching the shop in the Rue Baldini so we should know if Canson goes there. Say I'm on my way to Nice. I'd be obliged if he would fly down and meet me at the airport; then we can decide what to do. Is that clear?"

'Perfectly.'

'I shall take Bertie with me to Nice. If the Dove is on its way there it will of course beat me to it; but if Marcel gives his orders over the phone there should be ample time for someone to get there before it lands. Bertie, how much petrol is there in the Proctor?"

'She's a bit more than half full.'

'That won't see us to Nice. We'll drop in at Paris, Le Bourget, to top up.'

Ginger spoke. 'If you're going to stop at Paris why not take me with you and drop me off there? I could make personal contact with Marcel and tell him what goes on.'

Biggles considered the suggestion. 'No,' he decided, 'It wouldn't save any time and something might go wrong. It would be better if you spoke to Marcel from London.'

'What do you aim to do in France?' asked Gaskin.

'Consult Marcel about the best way to tackle this place in the Rue Baldini. I, personally, have no authority to do anything in France, but when I've put the case to the French police they may do something. As you know, Marcel Brissac is my Interpol contact. Over the other side I shall have to work through him. If he isn't available I might as well come home. I wouldn't think of taking any action in France without the French police. Only they can raid the shop or make an arrest.'

'Can I do anything at this end?' offered Gaskin. 'I'm thinking of the house here.'

'What could you do?"

'I could send down a plain clothes man in a private car to keep an eye on the place. This masked bandit and his pals may pull out.'

'That's quite likely after what's happened tonight. I'd be glad if you'd do that. I can't be in two places at once and my main concern at the moment is Canson and his machine. We should find the answer to the whole business in that Dove.'

'Where can I get you should anything urgent turn up? This is your case and I don't want to butt in without you.'

'As I haven't a clue as to where I might end up I can't answer that. In an emergency you might make a signal to Marcel Brissac at Nice police headquarters. I hope we shall be together and if we have a chance to call there

we will. I shall get back here as soon as possible. But that's enough talking. Time's getting on. It'll soon start to get light. We'll press on. See you tomorrow, or the next day, or some time. Come on, Bertie.'

The car waited until the Proctor had taken off and then headed for London.

# CHAPTER 14

## BACK TO NICE

AT ten o'clock Biggles was asking Nice airport control for permission to land. He had to wait a few minutes because the airport was already busy, one of the aircraft in front of him being the British Airways early morning flight from London. Bertie remarked that he could see the Dove below them.

'Good. So our guess was right,' said Biggles, as went in. 'At least we know Canson is here somewhere.'

To their great satisfaction they found Marcel there, having flown down from Paris in his own machine. Smart and dapper in his police uniform he had with a new assistant, who was introduced to them as Sergeant Jules Picot.

'So Ginger got through to you all right,' were Biggles' first words as they shook hands.

'As you see.'

'I suppose you were at home, asleep in bed?'

'But of course.'

'Sorry to drag you out.'

Marcel shrugged. 'It matters nothing.'

'Were you here before the Dove?'

'Yes. Ten minutes.'

'Was anyone here to meet it?'

'No. They took a taxi. Jules followed the two men who came in the plane. They went to the shop in the Rue Baldini. He came back to tell me. The shop is still under observation.'

'Had these men any baggage?'

'Nothing.'

'Then it looks as if they don't intend to stay long.'

'Tell me, what is this business?' requested Marcel.

'It's time you knew the whole story,' said Biggles. 'You will know if the men leave the house in the Rue Baldini?'

'At once.'

'Good. Then let's go and have some coffee and a *croissant* and I'll put you in the picture. Now we are in your country it will be for you to decide what to do. The situation is a little difficult.'

Over a light breakfast in the airport restaurant Biggles told the story in detail. 'That is how things stand at the moment,' he concluded.

'So you still do not know what it is these *escrocs* are doing?'

'No. It might be anything. But today, with your help. I hope to get the answer. All I know is there is some illegal traffic going on between France and England, carried on under cover of what I believe to be an innocent travel agency which has a holiday hostel on the coast at Antibes. I have been there,

and formed the opinion that the caretakers know nothing about what is happening. I believe the real French headquarters of the gang is the shop in the Rue Baldini; which means you are as much involved in this as we are — if not more so.'

'What shall we do? You're the old dog. I take your advice.'

'The ideal thing would be to catch Canson with contraband on him or in the plane. The trouble is we don't know what we're looking for.'

'I could take him in for questioning.'

'That's risky. If we found nothing on him we should have made it more difficult to catch him. You couldn't detain him. He might demand to see the British Consul and that could lead to all sorts of complications.'

'What else could we do?'

'You could search the plane — on suspicion. It's in your country. But again, if you found nothing, you would have done more harm than good. I believe that the most likely place to find what we're looking for is the shop in the Rue Baldini.'

'Would you like me to make a raid?'

'Frankly, yes. It should settle the matter, one way or the other, at your end of the racket. But I must leave that to you.'

'Very well. There's nothing else?'

'There is just one other thing we might try. As I told you, Ginger travelled in the plane. He had reason think that Rawlings, Canson's co-pilot, had done something in the cabin with a screwdriver. The only screw he could find were in the backs of the two front seats. I'd like to see inside the backs of those seats.'

'Let us do that. This is a good time. I am within my rights in searching any plane. Jules, fetch a screwdriver from the car and bring it to the plane.'

'*Tout de suite, mon Capitaine.*' Jules went off.

The others walked over to the Dove. There was no one with it. Presently Jules brought the necessary tools. They went into the cabin. Five minutes work and the back, well padded, was lifted from its seating. It closed a cavity. There was nothing in it. The back was replaced and the second one tried, with the like result.

Biggles said: 'This is where the stuff is carried. These seats weren't turned out like this by the makers. All we want to know now is what Canson puts in them.'

'If we wait here we may find out,' suggested Bertie,

'No doubt, but after what's happened at Millham we might have to wait a week or more. I can't see Canson carrying anything illegal to England for a while.'

'We will try the Rue Baldini,' decided Marcel.

They were walking back to the reception hall when Bertie said suddenly: 'Here comes Rawlings.'

'Don't let him see us,' said Biggles sharply, turning away.

‘He carries no baggage,’ observed Marcel. ‘Then as he’s known to them it’s unlikely he’d be checked through Customs.’

Marcel agreed. ‘Only if the Customs officers suspected anything would they search his pockets.’

‘He may be carrying something. If he is he may put it I the back of one of the seats. I’d wager that is what he’d been doing when Ginger saw him with the screwdriver. We’ll give him a minute or two if he goes in the cabin, then jump in.’

From a distance they watched Rawlings walk straight the aircraft and enter the cabin. They gave him a minute. He did not come out.

‘Now,’ said Biggles. ‘Let’s see what he’s up to, Bertie you keep an eye open for Canson. He may be about.’

They closed in swiftly on the aircraft. The cabin door had been left open. Biggles, followed closely by Marcel, jumped in. Rawlings was on his knees by one of the two front seats, the back of which had been removed. He sprang to his feet at the disturbance, but was unable to hide what he was handling, packing into the cavity. He could only stand there, staring, his face ashen. ‘All right, Rawlings, the game’s up,’ said Biggles sternly. He walked forward and, stooping, picked up of the objects Rawlings had been stowing away. It a wad of bank-notes. English five pound notes, brand new. There were a number of identical packets. He handed one to Marcel.

‘Well, do you want to say anything?’ he asked Rawlings.

It was obvious that the ex-airman was no tough. White and trembling he appeared to be on the point of collapse. His tongue flicked over dry lips. He seemed unable to speak.

Biggles went on: ‘You’d better come clean or you’ve had it for a long tune. Now then: where did all this money come from?’

Rawlings recovered enough nerve to answer. ‘Will I get off if I tell you all I know?’

‘That’s unlikely, but if you turn Queen’s Evidence you may get a lighter sentence. Don’t forget you’re in France, so the French police will want to know about it. Who does this money belong to?’

‘It isn’t real money.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s phoney. It was printed here.’

Biggles looked incredulous. ‘Are you telling the truth?’

‘I should know.’

Biggles compared one of the notes with one from his notecase. He handed them to Marcel. ‘This stuff is perfect. Don’t get them mixed or we shan’t know which is which. Do you want to ask questions?’

‘No. You continue. Your English is better than mine.’

Biggles turned back to Rawlings. ‘How long have you been importing this stuff into England?’

‘Two weeks ago for the first time. Up to then it went to other European

capitals.'

'Why?'

'Canson thought it would be easier to get rid of and less likely to be spotted.'

'Where was this lot going?'

'To Switzerland. Geneva.'

'Were you going alone or was Canson going with you?'

'I was going alone and then coming back for him.'

'Where is he now?'

'In Nice.'

'Where in Nice?'

'In the Old Town.'

'The Rue Baldini?'

'So you know about that. Yes.'

'Then you were going back to England?'

'No. We're not going back to England any more.'

'Oh. Why not?'

'Canson's got the wind up. He thinks the game's played out. His idea was to put this lot in a safe deposit in Geneva, take another load with us to the Middle East, sell the plane and disappear.' Rawlings now seemed anxious to ingratiate himself by talking.

'So you were going to double-cross the Boss at Millham, eh?'

'He means nothing to us.'

'What's his name?'

'I don't know for sure. I've never been told.'

'Does Canson know?'

'He may. Ask him yourself. He always refers to him as the Doctor.'

'How many men live in the house with him?'

'Only two, I think.'

'What about your pal Tomlin?'

'He's still at Millham.'

'Were you leaving him in the lurch, too?'

'He had a chance to come with us but he recently got married and wouldn't leave his wife.'

'Did the Boss know you were pulling out on him?'

'No. Something happened at the house last night and Canson reckoned it would only be a matter of hours before the police raided the place.'

'So he decided to save himself and let everyone else take the rap.'

'Yes.'

'Is this stuff actually being printed in the photographic shop in the Rue Baldini?'

'Yes.'

'And that's where Canson is now?'

'Yes. He's scared. He's not likely to go out.'



‘How much of this stuff have you here?’

‘Canson said twenty thousand pounds’ worth.’

Biggles nodded, ‘Okay. I think that’s all we want from you for the time being. You’d better fix that seat back on. Leave the money out,’ He turned to Marcel. ‘Do you want to say anything?’

‘No. We’ll take him, and the money, to the police bureau, and then I think we go to the Rue Baldini.’

So Rawlings was taken to the *Commissaire de Police* where he was formally charged and detained, in the first instance on a currency conspiracy. The spurious money was also lodged there pending a decision as to its disposal.

This was followed by a conference in which the whole affair was explained to the Chief of Police. He did not hesitate. He ordered a full scale raid immediately on the shop in the Rue Baldini. He himself would lead it. A plan was made over a large map of the district. This revealed that the shop backed on to an ancient church. Thinking there might be a bolt hole through it two men were sent to cover the exit — a wise precaution as it turned out. It was arranged that two *gendarmes* (armed policemen) would enter the street from each end and so complete a net round the establishment.

Being on French soil Biggles no longer had any say in the matter, but as Canson, one of the suspects, a British subject, was thought to be there, he and Bertie were given permission to watch events with Marcel. This settled the party proceeded to the scene in a police van.

The appearance of the uniformed police in the Rue Baldini, obviously engaged in a serious operation, caused something of a stir, for it was a busy time of the day. One of the first persons to become aware of it was the old woman who was at her usual post in the passage beside the door of the shop. She tried to get in, but Biggles had warned the police this might happen so she was too late. Fighting and screaming she was taken to the police van, parked at the end of the street, which was as near as it could get.

The door of the shop was locked, but the police soon had it down and charged in.

Biggles and Bertie waited outside so they did not see exactly what happened. There was some fighting, but no shooting. Presently two Frenchmen, and Canson, all handcuffed, were brought out and taken to the van. Two men who had tried to escape through the church were also brought in. That was all. With a *gendarme* left in charge of the premises the raiding party with its prisoners returned to police headquarters.

On the way Marcel told Biggles that the culprits had been caught in the act of printing bank-notes in a cellar under the shop. It was equipped with the latest thing in printing machinery. It may as well be said here that the old man who owned the place was a craftsman in the art of photo-engraving. In the subsequent search plates of bank-notes of several nationalities were found, proving how widespread had been his activities. But this was of no great

interest to Biggles. He was more concerned with the British end of what now looked like an international network.

No message had come through from Gaskin, so as there was nothing more for him to do in France he told Marcel he was anxious to get back home as quickly as possible. Before he went, however, he would like to speak to Canson, who might now be persuaded to tell the truth about what went on in the house at Millham.

This was arranged, and a few minutes later he was confronting Canson in his cell.

‘We’ve got Rawlings,’ he said. ‘He’s told us all he knows. Is there anything you’d like to say before I return to England?’

Canson glared. ‘You always were a cunning devil,’ he sneered, spitefully.

‘Never mind the compliments. Do you feel like talking?’

‘Why should I tell you anything?’

‘It might be in your own interest.’

‘How?’

‘You’re in France — remember? You’ll be brought before a French court.’

‘Aren’t you taking me back to England?’

‘I can’t do that. If you come clean it might be possible to extradite you to England for trial, although of course I can’t promise that. An extradition warrant would be matter between France and England. You stick your toes in and you’re likely to see the inside of a French prison.’

‘What do you want to know?’

‘Whose bright idea was this currency smuggling racket?’

‘Not mine. I was out of a job and answered an advertisement.’

‘Inserted by the man who lives at Millham House.’

‘Yes.’

‘Do the travel agency people, Sunnitours, know what has been going on under cover of their operation?’

‘No.’

‘But you fixed that up, I imagine.’

‘I did. The man who engaged me provided the money to buy the aircraft.’

‘You were at Millham last night. You know what happened. What are the people there doing?’

‘Nothing.’

‘You mean — they’re staying there?’

‘The old man is, anyway. You’ll waste your time going there. You won’t find anything.’

‘This man who wears a mask. What’s his name?’

‘He calls himself Doctor Fortescue. It’s probably an alias.’

‘Does he know you bolted?’

‘No.’

‘So he thinks you’ll be coming back.’

‘I suppose so.’

‘Is that all you can tell me?’

‘That’s all I know. I was simply employed as a pilot.’

‘And you brought in Rawlings and Tomlin?’

‘Naturally. I had to have ground staff and I knew them.’

‘These hollow seats in the Dove. Was that your work?’

‘Yes. It was left to me how I got the stuff home.’

‘One last question. Does your wife know what you’ve doing?’

‘She couldn’t know. She left me long ago.’

‘I’m not surprised. All right, Canson. I’ll report to the Air Commodore at Scotland Yard what has happened, the rest will be up to him. I’ll get along now.’

‘May I ask a question?’

‘You may, but I won’t promise to answer it.’

‘I thought this scheme was foolproof. How did you get on to it?’

Biggles smiled wanly. ‘You won’t like my answer that but you’d do well to ponder it. Knowing what you got up to in the Service I made it my business find out if you were now going straight. I took no pleasure in discovering that you weren’t. That’s all.’

Biggles went out. To Marcel he said: ‘That’s all I can do here. I’ll be seeing you again shortly. Thanks for your help. Now I’ll get home and tidy things up at my end. What about the Dove?’

‘We shall need it here. You will be able to take it home later.’

‘Fair enough. I’d like one or two of those bank-note to show to the experts at Scotland Yard.’

‘You shall have them.’

That was all. An hour later, after a quick meal, Biggles and Bertie were on their way home. They landed very tired.

‘I’ll just have a word with the Air Commodore to let him know we’re home, then I’m for bed,’ declared Biggles. ‘I’ve had enough for one day.’

# CHAPTER 15

## SHOCKS

AFTER a night's rest Biggles was on the move early, for, he remarked, this looked like seeing the end of a criminal affair into which he had stumbled more or less accident; merely to prove his point that once a certain type of man has resorted to unlawful practices he is unlikely to change his ways.

By the time the early morning cup of tea had been made Ginger was up to date with the situation. He was able to report that as far as Gaskin was aware nothing had happened at Millham House, 'What's the drill now?' he inquired.

'When I saw the Air Commodore last night he said he'd apply for a warrant to search the house and aerodrome buildings; so before we can do anything I shall have to wait for him to come in. While I'm waiting I'll have a word with Gaskin. As he was good enough to hold the fort yesterday he might as well be in at the finish. In fact, if it comes to making arrests I'd rather he did it. I'll suggest he brings one of his experts along to help with the search. We may find anything — or nothing.'

'What are you hoping to find?'

'A parcel of spurious money. That would be all the evidence needed. We know from Canson and Rawlings some was brought over.'

'You know, old boy, I've been thinking,' put in Bertie.

'Good. What have you worked out?'

'There's something I can't work out. According to Rawlings he had twenty thousand quid on him when we grabbed him yesterday.'

'I didn't count it but I could believe that.'

'Very well. If that's the kind of money Canson been importing one would have expected the country to be flooded with dud fivers — if you see what I mean. Why haven't we heard anything about it?'

'As far as I know there has only been the usual trickle of forgeries, mostly one pound notes.'

'Doesn't that strike you as odd?'

'I don't know,' answered Biggles reflectively. 'The new dud fivers may not yet have been spotted. They're the most perfect specimens I've ever seen. I'll Gaskin if he's heard anything about an unusual number of forged fivers in circulation. Ginger, you say nothing happened at Millham?'

'Not a thing. According to the man Gaskin put on watch no one has entered the house and no one has left. There's been no sign of life. He says the place might dead.'

Biggles frowned. 'I can't understand this. There must be something wrong. After what has happened or could have expected a complete evacuation.'

'Maybe the Boss is waiting for Canson to return.'

'That may be the answer.'

‘If they’ve got rid of everything incriminating they may intend to try to bluff it out,’ offered Bertie. ‘They won’t yet have heard of Canson and Rawlings being arrested in France.’

‘It’ll be interesting to hear what they say when I tell them that Canson and Rawlings have squealed. Well, we should soon know the answers. The Air Commodore knows I’m waiting for that search warrant so shouldn’t be late in. Let’s get on with it.’

They went first to the office at Scotland Yard. The Air Commodore had not yet arrived; but Inspector Gaskin was in and at Biggles’ invitation he came up.

‘Any news of Millham?’ was Biggles’ first question.

‘Nothing.’

‘You’ve still got the house under observation?’

‘Day and night. My man’s in a radio car. If anything should happen I’ll know within five minutes. It looks to me as if the birds have flown.’

‘Could be,’ admitted Biggles. ‘Tell me this. Have you had word from the Bank of England of an exceptionally large number of dud five pound notes in circulation?’

Gaskin’s eyes opened wide. ‘Is that right?’

‘I have reason to think so.’

‘Then I’ve heard nothing of it.’

‘I take it that if these fakes had been spotted by the banks you’d be told about it?’

‘Straight away. We should see the public were warned. If there was any distinguishing mark on the counterfeit notes they’d be told where to look for it.’

‘Even if these notes were exceptionally good would they be spotted?’

‘Absolutely certain. Are you sure you aren’t making a mistake?’

‘I can’t see how that’s possible. For some time now counterfeit English five pound notes have been turned out in large quantities in France and flown here. You can take that as gospel. I’ve seen the stuff— twenty thousand pounds’ worth in one consignment. Here’s a sample. Take a look at it. I can only think it must be so perfect that it hasn’t yet been spotted.’

‘So *that* was the contraband that was being carried!’

‘That’s it.’ Biggles went on to narrate what had happened in France. ‘I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you about it last night but I was all in by the time I got home.’

‘And what now?’

‘All we have to do is tidy up this end. The Air Commodore is getting me a warrant to search Millham House. I’m waiting for it now. I thought you might care to come along and give us a hand.’

‘Sure.’

‘When we take the mask off the face of the big Boss there’s a fair chance you might recognize him.’

‘I shall if he’s been in this sort of business before.’

‘There may be trouble.’

‘Suits me, if that’s how they want it. But I’d bet there’s no one there by now.’

‘We’ll see.’

The intercom buzzed. Biggles answered it. ‘I’ll be right down, sir,’ he said. ‘That was the Air Commodore,’ he informed, as he replaced the receiver. ‘He’s got the warrant. I’ll go and collect it.’

In a few minutes he was back with the document in his pocket. ‘That’s all we need,’ he remarked. ‘Let’s press on to Millham. The rest looks a straightforward job. I must confess to some curiosity because there are still one or two aspects of the case that puzzle me.’

‘Are you going to fly down?’ asked Gaskin.

‘I don’t think so. There’s no desperate hurry and a car might be handier for what we have to do. I’ll take Bertie and Ginger with me in our car. I suggest you follow us in one of your light vans in case there are prisoners to bring back.’

‘Okay.’

In a few minutes both vehicles were on their way.

When they arrived on the road that went past the house they stopped long enough to have a few words with the man who had been watching.

‘Anything doing?’ questioned Gaskin,

‘Not a thing, sir. Not a sight nor sound of anyone. No one’s been in. No one’s come out. No postman. No tradesmen. I reckon you’ll find the place empty. It looks dead to me.’

‘And me, in view of what you tell us. I’m not surprised.’

‘Let’s go and find out how dead it really is,’ put in Biggles.

Gaskin got back into his van.

Biggles’ car led the way up the drive to the house. It came to a stop before the front door. Everyone got out, and forthwith began a series of surprises which, as Biggles was later to admit, ‘fairly rocked him on his heels’.

Approaching the door in a body they did not have to knock, or ring, much less force an entrance. The door was opened wide by an unsmiling man dressed in the sombre style of a footman.

‘I take it you are the police,’ he said quietly and without emotion.

Biggles confirmed it.

‘Then please come in, gentlemen. Doctor Fortescue has been expecting you. Follow me. I will take you to him.’

The expression on Gaskin’s face as he looked at Biggles was comical. ‘What the hell!’ he ejaculated. ‘Is this some kind of a trap?’

Biggles did not answer, but he, too, was looking astonished. A courteous invitation to enter was not what had expected. Indeed, it seemed more likely they would have to force an entrance.

They followed the manservant across the hall to the door of the big room where Biggles had collected Ginger. He threw it open. ‘The police are here,

sir,' he announced, and then stood back to allow the visitors to enter.

From inside the room a voice was calling cheerfully: 'Come in, gentlemen. You've been a long time getting here.'

With one exception the room was exactly the same as when Biggles had last seen it. The same man was there, seated in the same chair, his hand resting on the same stick. The only thing missing was his mask. Without it there was revealed the faintly smiling face of a man perhaps sixty years of age.

Biggles spoke. 'Is your name Doctor Fortescue?'

'My name is Cedric Adrian Fortescue and I was once a doctor by profession.' The voice was that of a man education.

'That is your real name?'

'My real name. I have never used another.'

'Very well, Doctor Fortescue. I am going to ask you some questions. You are not compelled to answer, and must warn you that anything you say may be used as evidence.'

'I shall do everything possible to assist you. I assume you have a search warrant?'

'I have.' Biggles produced it.

'Before you start on what would prove to be a tedious and probably futile task may I suggest that you sit down; while we have a chat. It would save both time and trouble.'

'I prefer to stand.'

'As you wish. But what I have to say may take a little while. May I offer you some refreshment? I have a sherry which I can recommend.'

'No thanks.'

'You are sure you won't sit down? It is embarrassing to see guests standing while I remain seated. You needn't be afraid that I shall do anything desperate; and I promise I won't attempt to run away. After all, had that been my intention, even if it were possible I could have gone long before you came.'

'What do you mean — if it were possible?'

'I can't walk anywhere, let alone run. You see, I am paralysed from the waist down.'

Biggles could only stare.

'Once my two faithful servants have dressed me and put me in this chair I have to stay in it until they carry me back to my bed,' went on the doctor. 'They are still here. I told them to go, to escape while they could, but to their credit they refused to leave me. I hope you will keep that in mind when they are taken to court.'

For once Biggles was at a loss for words. He had come to the house prepared to battle with a gang of desperate criminals. Instead he found a helpless old man with two passive male nurses. He looked at Gaskin with eyes that asked a question.

Gaskin shrugged and shook his head.

The doctor was speaking again. 'Tell me what you know, or what you suspect, and I will then fill in the details of what you do not know.'

'You have for some time been importing from France, where they are printed, forged English five pound notes. Is that correct?'

'Perfectly correct,' confessed the doctor without hesitation.

'I seized a consignment yesterday in Nice.'

'I warned that silly fellow Canson it would happen if persisted. But there was no satisfying him. By the way, I didn't know he had a record of dishonesty until the young man standing behind you told me.'

'Why try to throw the blame on Canson? You need him. Why, if you had as much money as that, did you try to get more by a criminal enterprise?'

'Ah! There you are wrong. I did not do it for money.'

'Do you expect me to believe that?'

'Frankly, no.'

'If it wasn't for money what was it for?'

'For fun.'

'Fun.'

'That's what I said. Call it amusement if you like.' The doctor was smiling at the expression on Biggles' face.

'Do you call it fun to flood the country with spurious notes?'

'Again you jump to conclusions. I am not as wicked as you think. Not one of the notes brought to this country has ever reached the public.'

'What did you do with them? Don't expect me to believe you bought an expensive aeroplane to bring them here merely to burn them.' Biggles' voice was heavy with sarcasm.

The doctor picked up a key from the table beside him. 'In the corner of the room you will see a safe. This is the key that unlocks it. Oblige me by opening it. Then tell me what you see.'

With all his preconceived ideas turned upside down Biggles took the key, went to the safe and pulled the heavy door open. The interior was stacked with bundles of new bank-notes. For some seconds he stood gazing at them. Then he thought he knew the answer to this fantastic state of affairs. The doctor was mad.

'These are all spurious?' he queried.

'Every one. All those that have been imported.'

'What about those you used to pay Canson?'

'I paid him with my own money. I happen to be a very rich man, but, ironically, money is no use to me.'

Biggles walked back. 'But why did you do this?'

'I have told you. For fun. Or, if you like, for something to do. A man must do something, but there is little a man in my state can do. Nothing with a dash of excitement in it. There was a time when to relieve my boredom I did a lot of reading. Mostly detective stories — you know, what are called thrillers.



The villain was always caught at the end. This stuck me as being a little unrealistic and one day it occurred to me to put the matter to test. As detectives, the story, my own story, should interest you. Are you sure you won't sit down?' The doctor spoke calmly. There was nothing in his voice or manner to suggest he was not in his right mind,

This time the invitation to sit was accepted. Everyone found a chair.

The doctor took a sip from a glass that stood on a small table beside him.

## CHAPTER 16

### THE STRANGEST TALE OF ALL

‘WHEN I was a child,’ resumed the doctor, ‘my nurse made a remark which I have never forgotten. She said: “You’re a lucky little boy. You were born the richest baby in the country.” As each of my parents had a private fortune, and I was an only child, it looked as if she might be right; and, in fact, she was, for quite some time. I could indulge in anything I cared to take up. This was mostly outdoor sports and games, and if it is not immodest for me to say so I was good at most of them. I had my own horses, sailing yachts and racing cars. I ran a private plane. Being physically fit and fairly presentable I was able to enjoy life to the full. Not that I was just a playboy. For a profession I studied medicine, and qualified; but I never practised.’ The doctor smiled whimsically and went on:

‘As my nurse had said, I was a lucky boy. The luck was too good. I should have known it couldn’t last. No matter who you are you can’t expect Lady Luck to hold your hand all the time. She’s liable to get jealous. Then she fetches you a swipec that knocks you off your pedestal.

‘My luck ran out in the war. I joined the RAF. The powers that be decided I was a little too old for fighter aircraft so it had to be bombers. On my last trip over Germany the base of my spine was shattered by a piece of shrapnel. My second pilot brought the machine home. From that day I have been helpless and never free from pain. I was three years in hospital before being discharged as a hopeless case. Since then life has only been made bearable by pain-killing drugs. Of course, other men were stricken in the same way. but for me, after the life I had led it meant the end of everything. I had nothing to live for. I had all the money in the world but it was no use to me. More than once I contemplated suicide and had everything organized for it.’

‘I can understand that,’ interposed Biggles quietly.

‘Then one day I had a brainwave. It came as I was reading a detective novel. Here was a game I could play without leaving my chair. You may call it stupidity but to me it offered relief from the everlasting boredom to which I had been condemned. In my reading it seemed the criminal was always caught by making a silly blunder. I would pit my wits against the police. It would be an exciting competition to keep my brain active. I hadn’t a relation in the world so it wouldn’t hurt anyone if I lost the game. It had to be something simple and relatively harmless. Smuggling seemed to be the answer. Naturally, as a pilot I thought of aircraft. There was an unused airfield near at hand. All I needed was a reliable pilot who would obey my orders.’

‘What you got was an unreliable one,’ put in Biggles dryly,

‘I realize that now. I advertised for a pilot. Canson applied for the job. I told him what I intended to do and he fell in with the idea instantly. Unable to

get about myself I left him to organize everything. He bought the planes we needed and engaged the necessary ground staff.'

'He chose two men who had been involved with him in shady work in the RAF.'

'I know that now, thanks to Mr Hebblethwaite.'

'Whose idea was it to work under cover of the Sunnitours organization?'

'Canson's. I approved. It seemed a smart move in that it provided a reason for our machines to go overseas. He put the scheme up to them and they accepted. Well, for a time all went as planned. Canson made one or two trial runs, bringing in for my personal use only French foods and wines that are unobtainable in this country. Fortunately I am still able to enjoy my meals. There was no trouble so we decided to move on to something more ambitious. The weakness of my scheme was, not needing money I had no incentive to smuggle anything.'

'Then why did you choose spurious money?'

'That was Canson's idea. I didn't much care for it but I let it go. I was under no compulsion to use the forgeries. It was never my intention to foist the notes on the public.'

'Then what was the point of doing it?'

'No point at all, except that I was breaking the law. I had to do that or the game wouldn't have been worth playing.'

'Where and how did Canson meet these forgers?'

'That's another story. This is his version of it. Before he knew me, while staying in the South of France he had occasion to change some French francs into English money. He had won money gambling in the Casino at Nice, and as you know one is only allowed to take a small amount of French currency out of France. He asked the hall porter of his hotel what he could do about it. As a result he made contact with a man who asked him if he would care to buy some forged notes. That's the story he told me. How true it was I don't know. I don't know these people or anything about them. They did not concern me. Nor did it matter to me whether the notes were good or bad. I was smuggling, and I confess I got a kick out of doing something wrong. It gave me new interest in life. Do you believe me?'

'Yes,' answered Biggles. 'I can't see anyone inventing such a fantastic story. But I think it was an extraordinary thing for a man in your position to do.'

'That is how it must strike you, but remember, as you are not in my shoes you are in no position to judge. Then you had to step in and spoil my little game. Where did I make the mistake that put you on the trail?'

'It was nothing you did, if we rule out your choice of pilot.'

'How could I possibly have known he had a bad record in the RAF?'

'You knew he was crooked.'

'How?'

'Had he been straight he would never have joined you in what plainly was

a crooked enterprise.'

'Ah yes. I suppose you are right.'

'It so happened that I knew what sort of man Canson was. When I learned he had been granted a licence to operate from Millham aerodrome I wondered what he was really doing. You see, I have the old-fashioned notion that once a man starts swindling, to get money the easy way as he imagines, in most cases he goes on doing it. That was what brought me to Millham in the first place. To attack Hebblethwaite in Nice was a mistake. To bring him here was an even bigger blunder. When he disappeared I was bound to look for him.'

'That is what I told Canson when he reported what had happened in Nice. I had nothing to do with that. I knew nothing of it until Canson told me. I was angry with him. My scheme did not include the kidnapping of police officers.'

'Then why did you hold him a prisoner?'

'What else could I do? I was annoyed and disappointed. I had flattered myself that the scheme was foolproof, so it came as a shock to learn that it was so soon under suspicion. I was anxious to know how it had come about, what had gone wrong. I hoped Hebblethwaite would tell me, but he refused.'

'When Canson discovered he was one of my men you threatened to murder him if I troubled you again. Your criminal ambitions were going rather far, weren't they?'

'Indeed, I did nothing of the sort. This is news to me.'

'That was the message that was brought to me.'

'Not on my orders.'

'But you sent Canson to see me.'

'That is true. But it was only to say you had no cause to worry. No harm would come to Hebblethwaite. His detention was only temporary. Once I knew how you had found me out I would have let him go. The whole point of what I was doing, in my competition with the law, rested on that.'

'Canson told me a very different story. Had he given me your message correctly it's unlikely I would have risked breaking into your house.'

'I was a fool to trust him. He was furious, probably because he had more to lose than I had.'

'In what way?'

'He needed money, I didn't.'

'Why did you wear a mask?' inquired Biggles curiously.

The doctor smiled. 'Vanity, perhaps. I was playing the crook so I dressed up for the part. There is something sinister about a black mask — don't you think? Makes one really feel a rogue.'

'I wouldn't know about that,' returned Biggles dubiously. 'I'll admit I felt a bit of a rogue myself when I doped your dogs. I hope they're all right now.'

'Oh yes, they soon recovered.'

'By the way, Canson and Rawlings are now in prison in France. Where is the other mechanic — Tomlin?'

'I don't know. I think it more than likely that he has bolted.'

‘Why should he?’

‘He provides an example of how little crooks trust each other. The last time Canson came here he learned Hebblethwaite had been rescued. At first he was inclined to panic. Then he said he would make one more trip to France and return here.’

‘He had no intention of coming back. He was out to save himself. Had he not been stopped he would have flown a big consignment of bad notes to Switzerland and deposited them in a bank. He would then have flown to the Middle East, sold the aircraft and disappeared.’

‘Tomlin rang me up from the aerodrome and said he was sure Canson had something of that sort in mind. He wouldn’t come back, anyway. I didn’t care. I could see the game was played out.’

‘Why didn’t Tomlin go with Canson?’

‘He wasn’t given a chance. He was at home when Canson departed.’

Biggles glanced at Bertie, ‘Now we’re getting the facts.’

The doctor sighed. ‘So all my beautiful scheme has fallen to pieces. It seems the books are right. No matter how carefully a criminal may plan, sooner or later something goes wrong and the law catches up with him. It wasn’t long catching up with me, and I had ample time and money at my disposal. Ah well, it has been an interesting experiment. Well, gentlemen, whatever may happen to me there is one thing I must bring to your notice.’

‘Yes?’ queried Biggles,

‘The two men who live with me in this house, and for many years have devoted their lives to me, have not been guilty of any crime worse than keeping Hebblethwaite here, and that was on my orders. They are good men and have proved loyal servants. I don’t know what I would have done without them. I engaged them originally as cook and valet. Yesterday, when I realized what would inevitably happen, I advised them to leave. I offered them large sums of money — real money. They refused to go. They know nothing about my smuggling activities and have had no financial interest in anything I may have done. They may have suspected something irregular was going on but they did not question it. Please keep that in mind if you find it necessary to arrest them. And now, I really can’t stand this pain any longer. This is the only cure.’

The doctor picked up a small jar from his table, tipped two tablets into the palm of his hand and swallowed them.

Said Biggles: ‘The question at the moment is, what are we going to do with you?’

The doctor smiled. ‘I have just answered it for you.’ With both hands on the gold knob of his cane, one on the other, he rested his chin on them.

A strange attentive silence fell as they waited for him to speak again, to explain his last remark. Instead, very slowly and deliberately, he withdrew his chin and lowered his forehead to rest on his hands so that his face could not be seen.

Biggles waited another minute, 'Are you all right, sir?' he asked.

Then he caught his breath and hurried forward. He put a hand on the Doctor's shoulder. The body fell back limply into the chair. The cane struck the carpet with a soft thud. Biggles peered into the face that was still smiling, then looked over his shoulder at Gaskin.

'He's answered the question not only for us but for himself,' he said grimly. 'Those tablets must have been a fast-acting poison. He's dead.'

For some seconds nobody moved or spoke. Then Bertie murmured: 'Wretched fellow. What a pity. What a pity.'

Biggles pressed the bell.

The manservant who had let them in entered.

Said Biggles: 'Your master is dead. He has just committed suicide by poison.'

The man looked stunned.

'The doctor said he had no relations. Is that true?'

'As far as I know, sir.'

Biggles turned to Gaskin. 'Is there anything you want to say?'

The Inspector shrugged. 'No. What is there to say? That was the way he wanted it.'

Biggles spoke again to the servant. 'You have someone to help you to carry him to his room. There is a lot of money in the safe. I am taking the key with me. There will be an inquest. After that arrangements will be made for the funeral. You will stay here pending further orders from me. Is that clear?'

'Yes, sir.'

Biggles beckoned to the others and they filed slowly from the room to the bright sunshine outside.

As they paused on the steps of the house of tragedy Gaskin said in a melancholy voice: 'I don't know what things are coming to and that's a fact. If millionaires are going to start playing crooks just for the hell of it I might as well give up. I can't win.'

Bertie had this to say. 'You know, old boy, had it not been for you happening to know Canson's character this need never have happened. The doctor's little game of beating the police could have gone on indefinitely.'

Biggles shook his head. 'I doubt it. I know the type. Once he found it was easy and the novelty had worn off he'd have packed up. Let's get away. The place depresses me.' He was thinking that what had happened to the doctor could have happened to him.

The cars set off back for London. They called at the airfield on the way but there was no one there. Tomlin, apparently, had bolted.

\* \* \*

So ended the case of the man who was born with everything a man could want but was denied the one that really mattered.

It only remains to be said that the inquest was a formality. Biggles and Gaskin gave evidence having agreed to say nothing about the dead man's

irregular activities. Biggles' explanation for being in the house was that he was checking up on the ownership of aircraft. The verdict was a foregone conclusion, for after all, the dead man had said before witnesses that had often contemplated suicide: he couldn't stand pain any longer. Clearly, it had to be 'suicide while of unsound mind'.

Biggles and Ginger attended the funeral in the villa churchyard and laid a wreath on the grave of a man who was really a war casualty. There was only one other — from the two men who had given him loyal service.

No charge was made against them and after funeral they faded away. No great effort was made find Tomlin. He had played only a minor part, and if truth must be told Biggles was suddenly sick of whole affair. In spite of protests from the others could not shake off a feeling that he was responsible for the tragic death of an unknown war hero.

With Canson and Rawlings it was different. They were the really bad men of the piece. No application was made for their extradition so they were tried in France and Biggles derived some satisfaction from the long prison sentences they, with the forgers, received.

He, accompanied by Gaskin, made one last visit Millham House. This was to destroy, by burning them in the garden, the spurious bank-notes. With their destruction disappeared the evidence of a rich man's folly.

THE END